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Meet the Clans: Nightclan

A/N: Names will be added as the story progresses.

Starclan : *The clan of the spirits of the fallen and passed cats. The spirits have distinctive starry pelts.*

Nightclan : *A clan residing in a maze of caves and tunnels running through a mountain towering over the Great Forest the clans reside in. Named for their ability to navigate the dark and cunning battle moves.*

Leader:

Fallenstar - *a large black tom with orange eyes*

Deputy:

Lightstep - *a dark brown she-cat with hazel eyes*

Medicine Cat(s):

Stagpool - *a mottled tom with gold-blue eyes*

Rockface - *a brown and white tom with a blue face. Has green eyes.*

Medicine Apprentice(s):

Starpaw - *a black she-cat with a white star-shaped mark on her forehead. Has evening blue eyes.*

Lightpaw - *a white she-cat with green eyes*

Warriors:

Foxfire - *a ginger tom with green eyes*

Clearwater - *a pale cream tom with blue-green-brown eyes*

Eaglewing - *a brown and white tom with brown eyes*

Moonstep - *a black and white she-cat with green eyes*

Firestripe - *a ginger tom with dark stripes and green eyes*

Queens:

Waterfoot *- a blue she-cat with green eyes*

Meet the Clans: Snowclan

Snowclan : *A clan residing in the valley between the mountain of Nightclan and a neighboring mountain. They are on the West side. Named for their love of snow and easy maneuverability in snow. They are unmatched when it comes to leaf-bare hunting.*

Leader:

Froststar *- a white she-cat with blue eyes. Sister of Snowfeather and Icepelt .*

Deputy: Snowfeathe r *- a white she-cat with green eyes. Sister of Froststar and Icepelt .*

Medicine Cat(s):

Snowdash *- a white tom with pink eyes.*

Deerfoot *- a dark mottled tom with hazel eyes. His front legs are light brown. Does not have long fur like the rest of the clan.*

Medicine Apprentice(s):

Snakepaw *- a gray tom with dark stripes that look like snakes on his back and sides. Has brown eyes.*

Warriors:

Featherfoot *- light gray tom with white legs and blue eyes. His fur is short on his body and long on his legs.*

Oaktooth *- a calico tom with pine needle brown eyes*

Honeygaze *- a tan she-cat with honey-colored eyes*

Snowhare - *a white tom with green left eye and blue right eye.*

Crowfur - *a black tom with heather-colored eyes.*

Alderbark - *a mottled she-cat with hazel eyes*

Shardtail - *a black tom with white spots all over his tail. Has blue-green eyes*

Grassear - *a white she-cat with blue eyes. Named for the tufts of fur on her ears. (Mother of Lakepaw , Mousepaw , and Grasspaw)*

Whitetail - *a black tom with a all white tail. Has yellow eyes.*

Shortear - *a gray tom with green-yellow eyes. Named for his small ears.*

Longfur - *a brown tom with very long fur around his neck. Has dark brown eyes.*

Windfire - *a cream tom with amber eyes*

Ashfoot - *a gray tom with heather eyes*

Shimmertail *- a gray she-cat with amber eyes. has stripes along her tail.*

Amberheart - *a tabby tom with amber eyes*

Queens:

O a kwing *- a dark brown she-cat with leaf-green eyes (Mother of Icekit and Whitekit)*

Heatherpelt *- a white and gray she-cat with heather-colored eyes*

Elders:

Greatfoot *- an orange tom with green eyes. Has an extra toe on each paw.*

Apprentices:

Lakepaw - *a tom with muddy brown fur and acorn brown eyes*

Grasspaw - *a gray tom with dark stripes along his back and green eyes.*

Mousepaw - *a gray tom with blue eyes*

Kits:

Birdkit *: a gray-white she-cat with blue-green specked hazel eyes.*

Bluekit *: a multi-shade gray she-cat with patterns that make her fur look like feathers. Named for her unusually bright icy blue eyes.*

Icekit *- a white-brown tom with ice blue eyes*

Whitekit *- a white tom with green eyes*

Meet the Clans: Wingclan

Wingclan : *A clan residing in the forest at the base of the mountain. They are named for their ability to climb and jump through the trees like a bird.*

Leader:

C rowstar - *a black she-cat with green eyes*

Deputy:

Clawmoon - *a black tom with a half-moon shaped white mark on his neck . Has green eyes.*

Medicine Cat(s):

Blackfeather - *a black tom with gold eyes*

Medicine Apprentice(s):

None

Warriors:

Darksplash - *a dark ginger tom with a black patch over his right eye. Has green eyes.*

Pinefoot - *a mottled tom with amber eyes*

Elders:

Dustfur - *a pale brown tom with hazel eyes*

Queens:

Beewing - *a gray she-cat with dark stripes. Has blue eyes.*

Meet the Clans: Lakeclan

Lakeclan : *A clan residing on an island in a lake on the East side of the mountain. Named for their love of water and swimming ability. They were the first established clan in the Great Forest.*

Leader:

Icestar - *a white with black blotches she-cat with blue eyes*

Deputy:

Splashfoot - *a gray with white paws tom with blue eyes*

Medicine Cat(s):

Stopwater - *a blue tom with green eyes*

Medicine Apprentice(s):

Twistedpaw - *a gray tom with hazel eyes*

Coldtail - *a mottled tom with green eyes*

Warriors:

Ratface - *a gray tom with pink scar across his muzzle. Has blue eyes.*

Meet the Clans: Rogues

Smokeeye *- a blue tom with one green eye and one cloudy eye. Injured in a clan battle. Banished from the clans.*

Icepelt *- a gray she-cat with blue eyes. Mother to Bluekit and Birdkit . Left Snowclan with unknown reason.*

Jasper - *a black tom with amber eyes*

Prologue

What is this feeling? Why do I feel so weightless?

She opened her eyes and gasped. She was floating above her camp or what she thought was her camp. Some parts of the once bare circle of earth were now grassy and the dens situated among the trees and brush were smaller.

The kit narrowed her eyes in confusion. It was so similar yet so different. There were cats, most of whom she did not recognize, walking about, chattering excitedly as they began to gather outside a den. If she remembered the layout correctly, it was the nursery.

Faint mews were coming from the nursery as a large tom, barely able to fit through the opening, stuck his head out. The hanging lichen covered his face, causing purrs of amusement to spread through the cats. Purring loudly, he spoke. "Ashfire, come see your new sisters!" he called before backing back into the den.

A tom ran through the crowd and squeezed inside.

Curious, the floating kit began churning her legs, trying to get closer. She was frightened and delighted at the same time as she began moving toward the entrance. When her feet lightly touched the soft earth, she slowly went inside. She noticed that no one seemed to know she was there as she entered. No comment about her suddenly landing before them. No gasp. Nothing.

Not even the queens, toms, and kits within the nursery noticed. They ignored her as they awed over three tiny forms suckling at the teats of their mother. The warm scent of milk reminded her of her own mother, somewhere away from camp. She stepped closer and squeezed between two toms to reach the nursing queen.

She immediately recognized the three newly born kits. One was her leader, another was the deputy, and the last one was her mother. She couldn't help but start purring. Her mother was so tiny! It was

hard to believe she was once as small as her. Her mother was a large cat now, her fur beautiful and fluffy.

With the happiness came sadness. Where was her mother now? And why had she left? She could still remember watching her leave, disappearing into the fog of snow like a ghost. It had happened a moon ago but it was fresh like it had happened just moments ago.

The scene before her began fading and she looked around wildly, confused and scared. What was happening now? Suddenly everything disappeared and she fell into darkness.

Chapter One

She jolted awake and let out a squeak of terror. She rolled quickly onto her paws and stared around the warm den, panting. Never had she had such a frightening ending to a dream. Never had it been so vividly realistic. She had felt everything, her senses as alive as they were at this moment.

She looked over at the entrance when the sound of a cat rushing through snow, or attempting to, filled the air. She shook herself, hoping to calm down, and went to check out what was happening in the clearing. As always, when she stepped through the lichen, she was blinded by the sun on the snow. She blinked away the pain and, when her vision cleared, looked at the other kits playing in the snow in front of the nursery.

Her sister's familiar gray pelt stood out as she tackled their white denmates. The two tom kits blended in with the snow and it was hard to pick them out. The only giveaway was their bright blue eyes.

She jumped back to avoid some snow kicked up by their tussle. She shivered and fluffed out her fur. The dream crept back into her mind. Why had she dreamed of the past? Was it a sign from Starclan? This made her pelt prickle with excitement. A sign from Starclan! She should tell one of the medicine cats!

She scanned the clearing, hoping to see one of them out and about. Seeing none of the medicine cats, she ran around her sister and denmates and headed across the clearing to the large ancient oak tree that sat by the leader's den at the back of the clearing. She glanced to the right at the tunnel in the wall of thickly woven vines when she noticed a cat slip out out of the corner of her eye. It was Dustfoot, having finished using the dirtplace. He stretched before padding away to check on the other kits.

She snorted with victory. She hadn't been spotted. She had forgotten till that moment that she wasn't allowed to go near the

medicine den. The cats didn't want her and the other kits causing trouble for the medicine cats.

Eager to not be caught, she picked up the speed. She succeeded in tiring herself out battling the high snow before she got close. She was covered in clumps by the time she reached the large opening among the roots. Down below the tree was a cavern dug out by badgers chased out when the clans first came to the Great Forest. Since then, it had been carefully expanded to accommodate the occasional outbreak or many injured cats from battle.

She poked her head in, earning a growl of protest. "Go away, Birdkit!" snapped Snakepaw.

Birdkit huffed, not willing to be swayed in what she came to say. "I had a dream from Starclan!"

This made the grumpy apprentice emerge from the dark back of the cavern. His fur was messy from sleep. She backed away to let the mottled tom out. He sat down beside her after clearing some snow away with his long tail. He looked at her, studying the bright-eyed kit before him. "There is no way," he finally scoffed.

She glared at him. How he became a medicine cat still made her question the sanity of the clan. He was always so rude! She bit back a retort and promptly sat down, ignoring the cold against her behind. Amusement glittered in Snakepaw's dark golden eyes. This angered her even more. "I dreamed I was in the past!" she snapped, her ears back.

Snakepaw rolled his eyes. "Impossible."

"It's true! I saw Snowfeather, Froststar, and Icepelt when they were born! There were patches of grass and there was no snow! It was...dirt!" As she spoke, she watched his expression change to that of disbelief.

Still obviously trying to play it off as the imagination of a kit, he stuck his claws into the snow. "Let me guess: you saw old Dappleleaf and Stonefire?"

Confused as to who they were, she flicked her tail. "I didn't hear their names but there was a cat named Ashfire."

This made his fur stand on end and he had a spooked expression. "How is it you dreamed of things and cats you have never seen? You aren't even three moons old!" He worked the snow, his eyes wide. "Have you told anyone else?"

"No."

This made no change in his behavior. "Don't say anything about it unless we medicine cats or Froststar ask."

"Okay?" She was confused but knew that cats never spoke of what Starclan sent them. It was a law of the clans.

Snakepaw stood and shook his fur out. "Go back to the nursery. I will fetch you when Deerfoot and Snowdash return."

Excited, she stood. "Yes!" She ran back to the nursery, full of energy again. Her mind buzzed with possibilities about what was to come. Maybe she would be a hero! A warrior with legendary abilities? Or maybe a legendary leader!

Her daydreams were cut off when she was slammed into and knocked to the ground. Growling and scared, she wriggled free of whatever heavy body was pinning her and spun around. She huffed. "Bluekit!" she snapped. "Stop doing that!"

Bluekit, her sister, purred. She was covered in snow and her icy blue eyes of which she was named for shone with excitement. "Well, stop daydreaming! I was calling your name!"

Birdkit rolled her eyes but inwardly she chastised herself. "What do you want?"

"Greatfoot is going to tell us about the time he defeated four Lakeclan cats at once!" Her words sparked excitement in Birdkit.

Every cat loved the story. Greatfoot was a big orange tom with an extra toe on all of his paws. His paws were large and even as an elder, he could knock down a cat with no effort.

The two sisters raced to the elders' den on the left of the medicine cats' den. They took turns knocking each other down along the way, hoping to get there first. Birdkit won and held her tail high as she entered.

Greatfoot purred in amusement. "Hello, Birdkit and Bluekit. How are you today?"

Birdkit ran to him after shaking the snow off. Bluekit sat down to try and clean her fur of snow. Greatfoot began licking Birdkit's fur backwards to warm her. She purred loudly.

Her denmates ran in, their mother behind them. Her name was Oakwing, her fur a bark brown and her eyes a leaf green. She was named for the day she rescued explorative kits from a tree just before her warrior ceremony. She was still hailed as a hero by every clan. She had braved an incoming snow storm to find them so it was no wonder.

Her two kits, Icekit and Whitekit, joined Birdkit against Greatfoot. Oakwing helped Bluekit get rid of the snow clumps in her fur.

Once the two sisters were free of snow, Greatfoot began his story. He widened his green eyes dramatically. "There I was, standing before four of the best Lakeclan warriors. They had continuously ignored our laws and trespassed, stealing prey and sometimes even stealing herbs when our medicine cat was out for the half-moon gathering. They had figured out how to slip past our guards."

The kits complained. "They are horrible warriors!" growled Whitekit.

Oakwing purred. "Not every warrior can be trusted."

Greatfoot continued. "So, I confronted them one night when they were stealing prey. I had no way of going to get help but I didn't care. I wasn't scared. I was confident I could win. I was in our territory. I had the advantage." He was cut off by Snakepaw walking in.

"Birdkit, come with me." His eyes showed no sign of why he was

there. Birdkit knew immediately, though. She jumped and dashed to his side. Her tail quivered with excitement as the thoughts of possibly being chosen by Starclan entered her mind again.

Snakepaw led her out, ignoring the questions by the cats they were leaving. "Where is your father? He should know about this," Snakepaw growled, scaring Birdkit a bit. "He probably filled your head with days of the past."

Birdkit narrowed her eyes in disdain. He still didn't believe her? What happened to his reaction earlier? And why did he, like the rest of the clan, hate her father? She didn't have time to think more about it. Snakepaw was glaring at her, demanding an answer.

She had no idea where the tom could be. Or maybe she did and she had forgotten? Had he said where he would be today? She sat down, thinking hard. He rarely mentioned what he would be doing. Rarely even talked to her and Bluekit. She could vaguely remember only one time he actually spent time with them. It had been maybe a few days before her mother left.

"Well?" Snakepaw demanded, snapping her from her thoughts. She crouched down. *Think!* she commanded herself. But nothing came forth. When she told Snakepaw that she didn't know, he growled and looked around. He spotted the deputy heading for the leader's den.

"Snowfeather!" he called. Snowfeather paused and looked back at him. She seemed to be debating on whether or not she should go to him. After a moment, she walked over. Snakepaw didn't give the white she-cat a chance to ask what they wanted. "Have you seen Featherfoot?"

Snowfeather narrowed her green eyes. "He should have been back by now. He went with the dawn patrol."

Snakepaw snorted. "Of course. He is always out there staring at the sky. Send someone to fetch him. He is needed in the medicine den."

"What? Why?"

"To figure something out from Starclan," he said, clearly not wanting to talk about Birdkit's dream. Snowfeather understood the meaning. She flicked her tail as she glanced around camp.

"Honeygaze," she called to a she-cat passing by. Honeygaze padded closer.

"What is it, Snowfeather?"

"Can you go find Featherfoot and bring him to the medicine den? Don't let him try to leave you behind. You know how he is."

Birdkit watched her take off toward the entrance. Her father was beginning to act like her mother. She had been avoiding clanlife before suddenly leaving, Birdkit forced to watch her leave everything behind. Birdkit felt hollow. Was he going to leave the clan too? She made a promise to speak to him when she got a chance. She would try and get him to stay.

Snakepaw hit her in the face with his bushy tail, gaining her attention. She glared at him. He met her glare with an equally annoyed one. "Let's go." He continued walking to the medicine den.

Snowfeather purred at Birdkit. "Don't let him get to you. He is actually very nice."

Birdkit doubted it. She followed the medicine apprentice, feeling her heart weigh down with foreboding. When she reached the entrance, she paused. She felt scared. Would the other medicine cats be mad if they thought she was lying? She was just a kit after all.

"Get in here, Birdkit," Snakepaw called from within. She let out a breath and walked in slowly. Inside, Deerfoot and Snowdash were waiting beside Snakepaw. The large roomy cavern was dimly lit by the opening and she could see a pile of herbs sitting in front of Deerfoot, who sat in the middle. His hazel eyes were gentle as he gazed down at her.

She felt her nervousness melt away. She liked Deerfoot. He was always willing to play with her and the other kits. She walked up to

the pile and sniffed it tentatively, recoiling a bit as she imagined the bitter taste she had heard came from eating herbs. She heard a deep purr come from Snowdash. "I will explain why those are there when Featherfoot joins us."

She felt the anxiety of him possibly leaving come back. She had to talk to him after this or she may never get a chance again.

Some time passed and she dozed off pressed against Snowdash's warm belly. She slipped into a dream as soon as she closed her eyes.

This time she was standing on a thick gnarled branch in the ancient oak that towered above a stone clearing. The sky was dark and littered with stars, the moon nowhere in sight. When she looked down, confused as to how she ended up in a tree, she felt fear grip her tiny body. She let out a wail and dug her claws as best as she could into the branch.

"Somebody help me!" she wailed at the top of her lungs. No one answered her calls. After a while, when she had finally stopped calling for help, she heard a voice below. "Hello?" she called hopefully.

When the voice didn't reply, she gathered her courage and backed slowly to the trunk. *Cats don't belong in trees,* she thought crossly as she looked down for a branch to jump to. Just below her was a large branch that could possibly hold her small frame. She took a deep breath, not giving herself the chance to hesitate, and jumped down onto it, gripping it tightly when she began to slip from landing awkwardly.

She righted herself and looked down. She was above a cat that was barely visible in the dark. Another cat was running towards it. "Hello?" Birdkit called again. Still she went unanswered. Why weren't they answering?

The second cat reached the first and they touched noses. "Hello, Featherfoot," meowed the first cat. Birdkit could now identify it as a she-cat.

Featherfoot? What was he doing here? She couldn't tear her eyes

away as she got the feeling she shouldn't be here. She watched Featherfoot sit beside the she-cat and they twined their tails together.

"I almost wasn't able to get away from Snowfeather. She wouldn't stop talking about her catch."

The she-cat purred. "She is a great hunter. Let her boast."

"I know but when you hear it all day, it gets old."

"You should hear Ashtail. He can talk for days when you don't listen to his orders."

Ashtail? That was the previous deputy of Lakeclan. Ashtail had recently passed away from greencough. Then it clicked. This must be another dream.

"So, how did Mistyfur's kitting go? Did they make it?"

"Yes, thanks to Snowpaw. If you hadn't sent him at the border when you did, I would have lost my sister."

He purred. "Well, I couldn't stand by when I knew she needed a medicine cat. I still can't believe she had gone for a walk so close to kitting."

"My sister really wanted to visit Stormwhisker's grave. She wouldn't listen to anyone."

"She loved him. I understand wanting to visit." He paused. "That battle never should have happened."

"I agree. I don't trust Smokepaw. I don't believe he really had a dream from Starclan."

The scene began to fade. She tried to stay asleep. She wanted to know more.

She heard someone calling her name and felt a paw prodding her. She tried to bat it away, wanting to return to her dream. She wanted to know who the she-cat was.

"Birdkit, get up," came an annoyed growl by her ear. She opened her eyes unwillingly and rolled to her feet. She glared at Snakepaw who was turning away. When he was no longer in front of her, she saw Featherfoot.

Featherfoot's familiar light gray fur was full of small snow clumps. His fur was longest on his legs and spiky from being licked clean. His blue gaze showed he had little patience.

She swallowed back her fear and pushed her worries away. The talk with him had to wait.

"Go on, Birdkit. Tell them what you dreamed."

Birdkit looked at Snakepaw after he spoke. For once, he didn't look like he could be doing something else to spend his time. He was giving her an encouraging gaze and the small nod he gave her was enough to bring the words to her mouth.

"I dreamed that I was in the camp. It was night. There was grass and dirt. The camp was....smaller. And there were cats I had never seen before. They were gathered around the nursery. They were happy that Froststar, Snowfeather, and Icepelt were born safely. There was a cat named Ashfire who was called to see them by who I guess was the previous medicine cat."

She watched everyone's, except Snakepaw's, eyes go wide. Snowdash flicked his tail as he nervously licked his chest. Deerfoot let out a sigh as Featherfoot narrowed his eyes at her. His surprise had been replaced by annoyance. She crouched down, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

"Birdkit, don't tell me you think that this was worth wasting our time with. Whoever has been telling you stories of the past needs to quit because you are just making up stories based on what you've been told."

"But--"

"Enough, Birdkit! Come on. I'm taking you to your den," he growled as he stood.

Why didn't he believe her? Why was he always mad at her? Why did he never spend time with her and Bluekit? Why?

Snowdash growled. "Featherfoot, she should not be judged so quickly. I am sure no one told her about that night. Most of who were there are either gone or have been commanded to stay quiet. At least she didn't see what happened after."

After? There was more than just that happy moment?

Featherfoot snorted. "You honestly believe her nonsense?"

Birdkit jumped to her paws. "Stop!" she wailed, earning a growl from Featherfoot. "Just stop!" She couldn't do this anymore. Enough was enough! "I am tired of you always being mad at me. You're always saying I'm doing something wrong! I don't understand why you get angry. Do you hate me? Is that why? Do you wish I had never been born?"

Featherfoot growled. "It's your fault Icepelt isn't here! You were there when she left yet you didn't bring her back!"

Deerfoot jumped to his paws as well. "Featherfoot, it is not her fault! Icepelt's mind was made up. She couldn't handle all of the accusations. Why do you think it's okay to blame your daughter?"

"Birdkit should have tried harder to bring her back!"

"There was no changing Icepelt's mind. You know this better than anyone. Now stop pushing your kits away. They need you more than ever now that Icepelt is gone."

"I want nothing to do with them." With that, he ran out of the den.

Birdkit felt her heart shatter. Her legs became weak. Her father blamed her for Icepelt leaving. He did hate her.

Snakepaw walked over to her and used a paw to pull her close. "Sleep with us tonight. I want to see if you have more dreams."

Snowdash sighed. "Why don't we all go out for a walk?"

Deerfoot perked his ears. "Yes! A walk will do us nice."

Birdkit buried her face in Snakepaw's warm fur. She found herself agreeing silently. A walk would be nice. But she was confined to camp. She wouldn't be allowed to leave until she was an apprentice.

Snakepaw moved away and began to follow the two medicine cats out of the den. He looked back at her when he was halfway out. "Are you coming?"

She forced her legs to move, each step slow and heavy. Her heart weighed heavily in her chest. She hung her head, ears down. *He hates me...*

Snakepaw's tail on her back kept her on a straight path. She eventually heard a deep rumbling voice somewhere nearby but no words formed. She just kept walking, her thoughts a storm of questions.

She ignored the cold in her paws from the snow up until she sank through the snow that she hadn't heard Snakepaw warn her to jump over. She struggled for a moment and popped her head out just before she was pulled from the small drift.

She shook her head and blinked as she looked around, realizing they weren't in camp. Wait. Excitement filled her as the full realization dawned on her. She erupted into loud purring that shook her body. The medicine cats let out purring laughs as they waited for Snakepaw to catch up.

She was down once they were in an area of less snow. The three cats sat down as she began running around, sniffing different plants and objects, eager to learn all about the world outside the camp. After a while, she trotted over to them and pressed herself against Snakepaw's belly. He crouched down enough so that she was completely engulfed in his long fur.

She purred from the warmth. She stuck her head out from under his belly. Snowdash touched her ear with the tip of his tail. "You are a special kit, little one."

"I am?" she asked, her eyes wide. She was right!

"Is it really okay to tell her? Starclan is scared of the destiny she has."

"Why is Starclan scared?" The words scared her.

Snowdash sighed. "Yes, we must. We can try to prepare her. But that is for later. For now, let's show her our territory."

"I get to see more?" she squeaked as she began struggling out from under Snakepaw. Snakepaw stood, releasing her.

"Yes, you do," Deerfoot purred.

Her eyes shone. Today had been bad but it had also been good. Maybe her future wouldn't be so bad. Pushing her worries aside, she followed the three medicine cats through the trees.

Chapter Two

Bluekit poked her head out of the nursery, wondering where Birdkit was. Was she still with the medicine cats? She looked up at the darkening sky. She had been gone for a long time. She looked at the tunnel entrance when she heard pawsteps in the snow. She opened her eyes wide when her sister trotted through into camp, her head high and her eyes shining.

She ran out of the nursery and over to Birdkit as the medicine cats entered. "You were out of camp?" she wailed in distress. "Are you okay? Why did you go out? We aren't allowed to leave camp!" Her rapid words made Birdkit tackle her.

"I didn't leave without permission," she chirped as she got off of her.

Bluekit rolled to her paws. "What?" How had she been given permission?

"We took her out for a walk to calm her down after what happened in the medicine den," meowed Snakepaw as he brushed snow off of Bluekit's back with his tail. Bluekit looked even more worried than before.

"Calm down? What happened?" she demanded, anxious about her sister's health.

Birdkit sat down. "Can I tell her?" she asked, looking up at Snowdash and Deerfoot.

The two looked at each other, debating. What had happened in the den? Each second that passed was agonizingly slow for Bluekit. Finally, Snowdash sighed. "Might as well. Come on. We'll all go to the medicine den."

Bluekit followed them, noticing a look of despair come to Birdkit's eyes. She was beginning to doubt she wanted to know.

She pressed herself against her sister's gray-white fur. She felt her shivering a bit. "Are you cold?"

"I will be fine once we get to the den," she replied. "Do you think you could wait till tomorrow for the explanation?"

Bluekit felt compelled to say yes when she saw the sadness in her blue-green speckled hazel eyes. "No." The word was out before her heart could say 'yes'. "I am worried about you," she said quickly, seeing her hang her head. "I want to know now what happened. While it's still fresh."

"I guess you have a point."

Once inside the den, Bluekit and Birdkit crouched with their bodies pressed together for warmth, Snowdash began to explain what had happened with Birdkit's dream and Featherfoot. His words made her look at him in disbelief. She jumped to her paws, cutting him off when he started on about taking Birdkit out of the camp. "Liar!"

Birdkit and the medicine cats looked at her in shock. "What?" Birdkit gasped.

Bluekit glared at Birdkit. "Featherfoot would never say that! He would never blame you! And why didn't you tell me you had such a dream? Are you not sure it's because you witnessed Doveface kit?" Her sister's dream sounded like her imagination running wild. She was always making up stories about places she had seen in her dreams. Saying she knew what Lakeclan's camp looked like and even what the Starpond looked like.

Birdkit didn't hide the hurt she felt. "You don't believe me?"

Snakepaw spoke up. "Featherfoot is blaming her for your mother's leaving. When has he ever taken care of you?" His angry gaze seemed to pierce her soul.

She glared back, ignoring the chill of fear crawling along her spine. "He is always taking care of me!" she snapped. Just as the words left her mouth, she realized how Birdkit felt. Her memories whirled around.

Featherfoot taking her out to the edge of their territory at night. Bringing her the freshest, plumpest prey. Telling her stories. Everything he did for her, he never did for Birdkit. Birdkit was always asleep or off playing or eating a scrawny piece of prey. She always shared what little food there was with the other kits but Bluekit always got her own full piece. She had more weight compared to the other cats.

How had she not realized sooner? No. He was spending time with her. She remembered seeing them together by the prey pile a few days ago, talking. They were lying about him. She fluffed out her fur. "He would never say such things!"

Snowdash narrowed his eyes. "He is always taking care of you? When?"

"All the time. He brings me prey, tells me stories. He even plays with me." She wasn't going to tell them about the occasional nightly adventures.

Birdkit stood, her eyes with dismay. "He spends time with you?"

"Stop pretending he doesn't spend time with you."

"He doesn't!"

Deerfoot flicked his tail in annoyance. "Bluekit, have you ever seen him with Birdkit?"

"Yes."

"How often?" he pressed, wanting to clear up the matter.

She lost her voice. She hadn't seen them together often. Maybe a couple of times? But she still didn't believe he would say such things. It wasn't like him. "Not often but it still doesn't mean he would say things like that."

"Bluekit, why don't you believe us?" Birdkit asked, taking a step forward.

"Because you are always lying! I bet you just want to be leader!

That's it! You just want to be leader so you're doing everything possible to make sure that happens!" She turned and ran out.

She heard Birdkit calling for her as she ran back to the nursery den.

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Bluekit ignored Birdkit after that. She did her best to even avoid looking at her. Still, even though she was furious at her sister's antics, she couldn't help but kind of believe her.

Every time she found herself wondering if maybe it had all been true, something would come along, mainly Featherfoot asking her to join him, to change that.

Before she knew it, a moon had passed. Birdkit didn't sleep in the nursery anymore. She stayed by the sides of the medicine cats at all times. Rarely would she venture off to visit her former denmates.

Bluekit envied her. It wasn't fair that she was getting special treatment by the medicine cats. All because she was a liar about her dreams and about Featherfoot. She glared at Birdkit as she padded by, their leader beside her. What did Froststar want with her? She then remembered they were family. It was perfectly normal to spend time with Froststar.

She continued to watch them, noticing they were heading for Froststar's den. The medicine cats were waiting for them. Something was about to happen. Curiosity moved her toward the edge of camp. She pretended to make her way to the dirt place tunnel, her ears straining to catch snippets of their conversation.

".....Meeting....announce your new den arrangements..." Froststar was saying.

New den arrangements? Wasn't that a little bit of old news already? Birdkit had stopped sleeping in the nursery the night she had told her about Featherfoot. She had to know exactly what else was happening.

She glanced back and saw them disappear into Froststar's den. "Mousetail!" she muttered. She crept closer, sticking to the shadows

created by the dying light of the still short daylight. She managed to make it to the side and hide herself in a crevice between the roots of the medicine cats den and the woven vines and brambles that made their leader's den. She was able to hear them clearly.

But they didn't speak of what it was they were going to announce.

"Are you nervous?" That was Frostar. Her voice reminded her of soft snow.

"Yes," replied Birdkit. "But this is for the best."

"Bluekit will understand one day."

"She has to. If she does not accept her sister's ability, chaos will ensue," meowed Deerfoot.

Again with her sister's ability. Bluekit scoffed at it. Birdkit had no power from Starclan. She just wanted to make it easy for her to take the place of leader. She wouldn't have that position if Bluekit beat her to it first. Bluekit twitched her tail. She could easily imagine herself as leader. It would be a wonderful thing and her name would match a leader of old in the stories told by all clans: Bluestar.

She heard the swish of the vines moving around the cats as they left the den and she quickly realized that she had zoned out. She waited till they were distracted by the deputy to slip out and make her way to the dirtplace tunnel. She snuck in.

It wasn't long before she heard the familiar call for a clan meeting. "Let all cats old enough to hunt among the snow drifts gather!"

She ran out of the tunnel and went over to the nursery. She sat down beside Heatherpelt, a heavily pregnant queen expecting to deliver soon.

Bluekit looked up at Frostar's elegant form standing on a bare branch in the dead lightning struck pine tree. Once the rest of the clan was gathered in the clearing, she sat down, her fluffy tail curling around her paws. "I have an announcement to make about Birdkit."

Confused murmurs spread through the clan. Bluekit heard an annoyed curse come from behind her and she twisted around to see Featherfoot behind her. Excited, she moved to where she was pressed against his warm belly fur.

Froststar silenced the gossiping cats by raising her tail. "Birdkit will be moving into the medicine den."

This ignited more confused meows. "Why? She is still a kit!" called out Oaktooth. The big warrior was standing now, his green eyes blazing.

Froststar gave him a cool gaze. "I understand that. I am not saying she is becoming a medicine apprentice. Birdkit is sick."

A good number of the clan gasped and a wail rose from Whitekit. "She is sick?" he wailed in despair.

Bluekit snorted. It was obvious she was fine. How could they believe such a lie?

Froststar seemed to hesitate. Knowing her, this was hard for her. She hated lying to her clan. Bluekit felt bad for her. Froststar took a breath. "Birdkit will be fine. Aside from that, Birdkit has special permissions to leave camp with an escort. She may also attend the Gathering."

This caused both confusion and outrage. Bluekit growled. *Why does she get permission? I have to sneak out!* She looked through the crowd at Birdkit, who was sitting in between Deerfoot and Snowdash. Snakepaw sat behind her. His tail was flicking.

Froststar said something but her voice was drowned out by the cacophony of voices. She stood and raised her face to the sky. "Quiet!" she shouted, silencing every cat. Each set of eyes was now focused on her again. She looked back down at them. Her eyes were blazing. "No one will question my decision!" she commanded. "Anyone who does will suffer the consequences! If you try and stop Birdkit from doing what she is allowed to do, you will also be punished.

"I have my reasons to give her these permissions! She must be treated with respect. She is important. If she chooses to watch the training sessions, she is allowed to. If she would like to hunt, she may hunt." She was interrupted by Oaktooth.

"She is just a kit. What makes her so special that she is more important than the rest of us?" Oaktooth growled.

"That is something that does not concern any of you. Oaktooth, you are hereby confined to camp for seven days. All apprentice duties are given to you."

This angered the tom but he stayed silent. Perhaps he was scared of lengthening his confinement. Bluekit was just as shocked as the rest of the clan. Froststar had never been strict before. Froststar let her angry gaze linger on the gathered cats below a bit longer. "You are dismissed."

Bluekit watched her climb down and go to Birdkit's side. The two, along with the medicine cats, began to walk toward the tunnel entrance.

Angry and confused, she ran after them. She pounced Birdkit and began churning her hind legs on her back once her sister was pinned. "You lied about Featherfoot again, didn't you? That's why you are getting special treatment!"

Froststar pulled Bluekit off of Birdkit. Snakepaw growled. "Bluekit, what is the meaning of this?"

"She is only trying to get attention!" she wailed.

"Bluekit, she is not trying to get attention," Snowdash meowed after putting his tail over Snakepaw's mouth. "She is important. One day, you will know why. For now, apologize and please understand that it is not your time to know."

"I will never apologize! She only wants to be leader. She will do anything to get to that position! She is a liar!"

Her loud voice brought other cats closer. Froststar set her down gently. "Bluekit, your apprenticeship will be set back one moon.

Think over what you have done, apologize, and I will consider lifting your punishment."

Birdkit let out a wail. "Please don't do that, Froststar. I forgive her. She is just confused."

"No, Birdkit. Attacking a clanmate is an intolerable offense. She must suffer the consequences. Let's go." She turned around and continued walking.

With a whispered apology to Bluekit, Birdkit followed her. Bluekit glared after them. *This is your fault, Birdkit.*

Chapter Three

"Birdkit!"

Birdkit whirled around, her awe at a huge blue butterfly broken. A beautiful she-cat stood before her, stars forming a blue pelt. Birdkit's eyes went wide. "Are you a StarClan cat?" she breathed.

The she-cat purred at her excitement and awe. "Yes. I am the half-sister of Leaffoot."

Birdkit tilted her head. "Half-sister?"

"Yes, a result of a forbidden love between your clan and Nightclan."

"What? But isn't that okay? Love should not be judged."

"Wise words for a young one. Yes, love should not be judged but a love like that can lead to war. Sadly."

Birdkit could somewhat understand what she meant but her heart still pulled on the 'love not be judged' idea. "What is your name?"

"I am Birdeye."

"You have almost the same name as me!" she exclaimed as she sat down, earning a purr from Birdeye.

"I was the best at hunting as an apprentice and it showed throughout my life. Nothing escaped. But putting that aside, I have a message."

"A message?"

"Beware of the blue jay. The blue jay has its eyes on the top. Misfortune will befall the clan if the blue jay is not stopped."

The green forest around them faded to darkness as fire began leaping up from thin air. The sound of cats in pain and fear began

to echo eerily through the now hot air. Birdkit soon found herself in a strengthening image of the camp. Trees and nests burned. Smoke was thick in the air.

Through the running chaos of cats, in front of Frostar's den, lay Frostar, pinned by a large cat whose fur strikingly resembled Bluekit's.

"No!" Birdkit tried to move to protect Frostar but her legs would not listen. She was frozen. She watched in horror as the cat lifted a paw, claws out. "Frostar! Someone help her!"

The cat swiped its paw across the leader's throat, blood spraying up in the path behind her claws.

"Frostar!" Birdkit wailed in grief as she watched the death throes begin. The attacker backed away. Blood pooled around the dying leader as her lives were taken, the power unable to heal the wound.

The mysterious cat turned and disappeared into the cats running about the camp.

Birdkit woke with a start. She panted, shaking from the vision. She rolled onto her feet after a while of laying on her back. She felt sorrow fill her heart. Was that the true fate of Frostar? Such a kind cat. Who would ever want to kill her? All of the clans respected her. She had no enemies because she had brought peace as soon as she became leader.

So who was it that wanted to end her life and leadership?

The cat entered her mind and she felt a sense of foreboding as Bluekit came to mind. There was no way it had been her. Bluekit would never do something like that, would she?

She shook her head. She needed to speak with Frostar and the medicine cats about this and the warning given to her.

She shook out her fur and sat down to groom. As she was finishing smoothing out her fur on her chest, she heard her name being called from outside the den. "Just a second!" she called before smoothing out the last few bits of fur. She trotted out when she

finished.

Snakepaw was waiting for her. He lowered his head to her ear. "We're going to our meeting place," he whispered.

Since the day of the announcement of her den arrangements a moon ago, the leader and medicine cats had discovered a hidden area off the territory where they could speak with her in private. Whenever there was a memory she walked through, they would talk about it in their secret meeting place.

"What's wrong?" she asked quietly.

"We shared a dream." He turned and started walking. "The others are already there."

She walked beside him, sticking close to him. He had become protective of her and he kept those against her arrangement and status away.

As they drew closer to the tunnel, Birdkit felt eyes burning into her. She paused and glanced around till she spotted Bluekit glaring at her. Beside her was their father. Malice was evident in his eyes.

How had such a close family fallen apart in her mother's shadow?

With a heavy heart, she looked away and returned to Snakepaw. He had stopped to wait for her. "You are a strong warrior," he said, making her look up at him in surprise.

"How?"

"You are carrying burdens in your heart that a normal would break under. You have been very mature about this. Even Froststar admires you."

Her heart leaped with joy. "She is proud of me?"

He purred. "Yes and so am I."

She felt shy from his praise. "Thank you."

Birdkit sat down on the cold ground in the small clearing outside of their territory's eastern border. Her fur was fluffed up against the chill. Snakepaw pressed against her to share his warmth.

She purred a bit but her dream was haunting her again. She shivered as she remembered the scene she had witnessed. Froststar, Deerfoot, and Snowdash waited patiently for her to begin.

"Birdeye came to me," she said after a while of trying to make sense of her dream.

"Birdeye?" Sadness entered the cats' eyes as Froststar echoed the name. "Such a sweet cat. She died a hero rescuing me from the flood."

Birdkit looked at her. Questions filled her mind but she pushed them away. That story could wait.

"She brought me a warning and a vision."

"The warning. Was it about a blue jay?" asked Snowdash.

"Yes. Did you get the vision?"

"No." He looked at the other three as they all shared the negative answer. He returned his gaze to her, now worried.

Birdkit took a deep breath. "I...I saw fire around and in the camp. Our clan was running around in panic. The two cats that caught my attention was Froststar and I believe the other was Birdkit as a warrior."

"The blue jay mentioned must be her," Snakepaw realized.

Birdkit silently agreed. "She killed Froststar after pinning her and clawing her throat open."

Froststar's eyes were wide. She was frozen as if she had become ice. Snowdash pressed against her.

"What do we do? We can't just take away her right to be a warrior," Deerfoot said, his tail flicking.

They all fell silent, lost in thought. After a bit, Birdkit spoke. "A guard?"

Frostar sighed. "If I am so easily overwhelmed by her, then that would be best. I must be sick or too shocked at the moment to really fight back to save my own life."

"We will have to watch her closely. If anything screams to us that she is doing something wrong, then we talk with StarClan and ask their permission to kill her if it comes to that," Snakepaw said, standing.

"Yes," Birdkit reluctantly agreed. If Bluekit was going to kill their leader in the future, there was a chance they would have to kill her.

Frostar sighed again as she crouched. "We are still missing pieces of her future among us. We need to know her place."

"We will ask for information but you know there is a low chance of it being given," Snowdash said. "When Snowfeather returns, we will tell her about everything she has missed."

Snowfeather, Frostar's sister, was visiting the original clans on far across the land to relay news of the sister clans residing in the north.

Frostar flicked her tail. "I hope she is all right. I worry for her. This is her first time being chosen as the Clan Messenger."

"StarClan runs with her," Snowdash assured her. "She is alive and well. Your mother came to me last night."

Frostar let out a breath of relief. "I'm glad." She purred. "Let us head back. It is time for the next set of patrols to be organize."

Birdkit curled up in Snakepaw's nest with Snakepaw that night. It was colder and Snowdash suggested sharing nests to keep warm.

They had no rejections.

She closed her eyes and felt Snakepaw wrap his long tail around her. She could feel the vibrations of his purring. She felt warm after a bit and it made her sleepy. His purring comforted her and she slipped into a dream.

She opened her eyes when she heard birds chirping above her. She could still feel Snakepaw beside her. She looked at him and saw him looking around. "This isn't StarClan," he said in confusion.

They got up together and she watched Snakepaw turn around, taking in all of their surroundings. "No, this is impossible."

"Snakepaw, what is it? Where are we?"

He looked at her, his eyes wide as the full moon. "We are in the past. This is where I was rescued from a badger. Or we're seeing a vision together."

She flicked her ears back when she heard voices. The two cats immediately jumped into a nearby bush. They peered out through the branches as two cats stepped out of the undergrowth.

She immediately recognized Snowfeather and the cat from her vision. She still couldn't help but reminded of Bluekit again.

The two were talking about the clan's good hunting and news about a new litter of kits. Snowfeather's fur shone in the sun, making her stand out among all the bright and dark greens of warm weather.

The other cat, whose voice revealed her to be a she-cat, was also standing out with her gray fur.

Birdkit felt her heart pang with sadness as the she-cat turned to follow a sound under a root. Her eyes were exactly like Bluekit's. It was her. All grown up and a killer hidden behind a happy exterior.

Snowfeather had no idea what was going to happen to her sister, then. Otherwise she wouldn't be with her alone, right? Unless they were in on it together. Birdkit shoved the thought out of her mind. Snowfeather would never betray them. Such a thought was uncalled

for.

She watched Bluekit turn away from the tree root with a mouse in her jaws. She returned to Snowfeather and the two headed in the direction of camp. As soon as their tails vanished from sight through tall grass, the scene rippled like water and vanished.

Birdkit woke up and sat up quickly. It was bright outside and light entered the den. Snakepaw stretched beside her. "What a weird vision. Why would they be together if Snowfeather knows about the warning?"

"Maybe she was trying to pretend to be her friend?" she offered, not wanting to voice her earlier thought about Snowfeather.

"Or she is allied with her."

So they shared the thought. She sighed. "We need to discuss it with the others."

"You're right."

As he finished speaking, Snowdash ran into the den and over to the herb stock cave, recently hollowed out to make room for the new herbs recently discovered. He was soon running out with a honeycomb wrapped in leaves.

Snakepaw jumped up and ran after him. Birdkit followed, knowing that their most precious medicine was used only for emergencies. She followed them across the camp to the nursery where loud coughing could be heard.

She slipped in behind the medicine cats and stopped beside Snakepaw. Inside, Icekit and Whitekit were both laying weakly beside their mother, coughing and wheezing. Some leaf bits were on their muzzles, indicating they had been given medicine. Deerfoot, Snowdash, and Oakwing all encouraged them to eat some honey to ease their sore throats.

Snakepaw joined them, using a paw to lift Icekit. Birdkit ran over and pressed against Icekit's other side to steady him while Snowdash put the honeycomb to his mouth. Icekit finally began

lapping at the delicious medicine, his licks weak and slow.

When Icekit refused more, they helped him lay down before repeating with Whitekit. Whitekit was more difficult to persuade but he eventually licked up some honey.

Once the two kits were asleep from a poppy seed, Snowdash picked up Icekit and carried him out. Deerfoot grabbed Whitekit by his scruff and followed Snowdash out of the den. Oakwing followed worriedly.

"Snakepaw, will they be okay?"

"I don't know. It looks like they have whitecough." He was examining something on the ground by the nest.

Confused, she went to investigate it but was stopped by Snakepaw's tail. "Stay away. I don't want you getting sick. Come on. We need to get the nests changed out." He led her out and over to the apprentice den. They went inside and they found three of the apprentices sleeping from dawn patrol.

Snakepaw shook each of them awake. The three sleepy apprentices grumbled as they got up from their nests and lined up in front of them.

"Lakepaw, Mousepaw, Grasspaw, you need to clean out the nursery. Fresh nests need to be made and the old bedding taken far from camp. This is an emergency. Get on it!"

The word 'emergency' woke them up. Without asking what was wrong, they ran out of the den. Snakepaw looked at Birdkit. "Let's go speak to Froststar."

Chapter Four

"I don't have any more catmint since the huge rock crushed our only source," Snowdash meowed wearily a few days later. Birdkit lifted her head as he sank down into his nest. Deerfoot and Snakepaw joined them.

"We will have to go in the morning to another clan for help," Snakepaw said as he stretched. "I will go to Nightclan."

"Then I will go to Wingclan," Deerfoot said sleepily. His eyes were closed and his head was on his paws.

Snowdash cleaned his paw for a moment. "That leaves me Lakeclan."

Excitement coursed through Birdkit. "Can I go with one of you?"

"When you are an apprentice, you can join us. For now, you will stay here."

"Aw, why can't I go?"

"You are only four moons old."

"That's not the only reason," she said, seeing his eyes flash. Snowdash purred as he draped his tail over her back as she got into his nest. Snakepaw and Deerfoot were purring as well.

"With you so young, the clans would mock us for allowing a kit excess to all the privileges of a warrior," Snakepaw meowed before getting up and joining Deerfoot. "And since we don't have the battle skills of a warrior, it would be dangerous."

"Oh," she replied, understanding. She pressed against Snowdash's side. "Well, you have a point." She curled up and rested her tail over her nose.

"You can spend time with Froststar tomorrow," Snowdash

suggested.

"Okay," she said before yawning. She let sleep take her as she listened to the purring of the toms.

Birdkit lifted her head when she heard coughing from the other side of the den. She blinked sleep away as she tried to figure out the scents of who was in the den.

She recognized Icekit and Whitekit and there was a new one: Snowhare. She got up, smelling the sickness coming from him as he coughed. She ran over to him, sniffing him over. "Snowhare, what's wrong?"

"Where are the medicine cats?" he rasped.

"Out getting catmint." She could feel the heat of fever when she pressed her muzzle to his forehead. Her mind raced with the list of herbs she had learned from living with the medicine cats. *Treat fever with feverfew.* She walked into the dug out storage room and grabbed a leaf, recognizing it immediately after a quick scan of the herbs.

She heard Snowhare shuffle over to the where Icekit and Whitekit lay in nests made for sick and injured cats. As she backed out, fur brushed the entrance. She looked over and saw that the new arrival was Crowfur.

His fur was raised and his eyes full of fear. "Heathertail is kitting!" he exclaimed. He looked around. "They're not here?"

"They've gone to get catmint," she mumbled past the leaf as she quickly went to Snowhare. She dropped the leaf in front of him. "Eat this. It is feverfew. It will lower your fever."

Crowfur let out a breath of shock. "You're a kit! How would you know?"

Snowhare ignored his clanmate's words and took the leaf into his mouth, making a face at the taste. Birdkit returned to the storage

and grabbed a stick by one end. She dragged it out and over to Crowfur. She dropped it. "Take this to her. I will gather the herbs."

"I know the stick part but are you sure about the herbs?"

"I have been living with medicine cats," she replied as she held her head high. "They teach me about the herbs and how to give them."

He flicked his tail. "Where are they?"

"The medicine cats? They are each visiting the other clans to gather catmint."

"Then I don't have a choice but to trust you. Curse the many toms among us." He picked up the stick by the middle and backed out before turning and running off.

She returned to the storage and gathered the herbs she would need into her mouth. She ran out of the den, nearly colliding with Oakwing as she appeared from the elders' den. "I heard what Crowfur said. Let me help you!"

Birdkit twitched her ears in acknowledgement as she gave her a brief look. Together they made their way to the nursery. Heathertail's moans of pain could be heard. Cats who were milling around camp after patrol now were crowding the entrance. They parted at the call of Oakwing.

Birdkit felt her heart pounding as she ran to Heathertail's side. She dropped the herbs as Oakwing pushed Crowfur away. She ran a paw over Heathertail's belly. She had been trained in the signs of kitting during her own kitting. "They're coming."

"Heathertail, eat these," Birdkit meowed when Oakwing blinked at the herbs. Heathertail lapped up the herbs when Birdkit placed them by her mouth. She almost couldn't eat them with each wave of pain.

Soon she let out a shriek. "They're coming!" Crowfur quickly placed the stick in her jaws. Birdkit and Oakwing moved to where they could watch. With a great push, a tiny kit slithered out.

Crowfur let out a purr that shook his body. Oakwing nipped open the sack and picked it up by the scruff. She carried it to Crowfur and set it gently down in front of him. "Clean it," she ordered and Crowfur began licking the tiny form.

Another shriek sounded and the stick cracked between Heathertail's jaws. Another tiny kit was pushed out. Birdkit copied Oakwing's movements and released the kit from its sack. Oakwing took it from her and began cleaning it.

The brambles rustled a bit at the entrance behind them and Birdkit turned to see Frostar. Her eyes shone with pride. "How many more?"

Oakwing paused to run her paw over Heathertail's belly. The queen was panting hard. "She has two more."

"This one is a she-cat!" announced Crowfur suddenly. Frostar raised her tail high at the news. Oakwing continued to clean the second kit.

A moment passed and Heathertail pushed out another kit. She puffed, clearly exhausted. Frostar took care of the new arrival. Oakwing gave the second kit, another she-cat, to Crowfur. Birdkit felt fear rise when she saw Heathertail drop her head weakly after gazing for a moment at her kits, love in her eyes.

"Heathertail, you have one more," she meowed. "You can do it!"

Heathertail convulsed with another wave of pain and the stick completely broke as she pushed out the final kit. She spat out the stick as she panted. Crowfur and Oakwing set the first two at her belly. Frostar purred as she set the third alongside them. "Another she-cat."

Heathertail managed a purr. Birdkit finished cleaning the final kit and Frostar moved it to Heathertail's belly. Their cries were silenced when they began to feed. Birdkit purred, happy she had done well. "The last one is also a she-cat."

Heathertail purred loudly. "I'm so happy," she rasped as Crowfur

laid down against her back.

Frostar turned to Birdkit. "Well down, young one. Come. You should announce the news of this blessing." She turned her gaze to the queen and her mate, Oakwing nudging a ball of soaked moss closer to Heathertail's mouth. The exhausted queen lapped at it gratefully. "Oakwing, well done in working alongside Birdkit. Crowfur, Heathertail, congratulations!" Frostar purred.

Birdkit let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding as her held back emotions crashed down on her. She had been so focused on making sure things went right that she hadn't noticed the awe and fear she felt. She felt full of energy still from the success as she turned and walked out to announce the good news to the waiting anxious cats.

Their eyes were fixed on her as she walked out, their ears pricked. She took in a breath. "Four kits and all are she-cats!" she yowled.

Cheers went up, filling the camp. They took turns visiting the happy mates when they were given permission to enter. Birdkit headed to the medicine den, her mind now set on Snowhare.

Snowhare was laying down in a nest, still coughing. Birdkit slipped into the storage and grabbed the bundled honeycomb. She carried it to Snowhare and set it down. After unwrapping it, she nudged his shoulder. "Have some. It will help your throat and cough."

He lifted his head and lapped the honey. He let out a weak purr when he laid his head back down. She wrapped the honey back up and returned it to the back of the storage. *A poppy seed will help him sleep.* She used her claw to separate one from the pile before pressing her paw on it, sticking it to her pad.

Hopping on three legs, she returned to Snowhare and he lapped it off of her paw. "Thank you, Birdkit," he rasped. "You should be a medicine cat."

She purred as she turned away to get some moss. "I wish I could. I will be back." She went back into the storage and rolled some of the moss from the corner of the storage. She picked it up in her mouth

and carried it out. *I will have Froststar escort me. Hopefully no more cats arrive in the den while I'm out.* Once outside, she glanced at the sky and realized it was past sun-high.

Frostsar padded over to her from the nursery entrance. "Need an escort?" she meowed, noticing the moss. When she received a blink in reply, she purred. "Let's go."

Birdkit was grateful as they walked out of camp. Once out of the walls, she felt her worries melt away. The chill of leaf-bare cut through her fur as they walked. Froststar was purring loudly.

"I am very proud of you. With our clan so small and full of males, every bit of help is needed with kitting. I am glad they have taught you the ways of a medicine cat," she said. "And hopefully the ice on the stream is thin today." She looked briefly at the sky as they topped a slope not far from the entrance of the camp.

"I would make you a medicine cat if there wasn't such a bleak future ahead of us." She fell silent as they jumped over a fallen tree killed by a blizzard last leaf-bare. Birdkit briefly remembered the story from Icepelt. A pang of sadness struck her.

Their travel brought them to the middle of the territory. A frozen stream cut through the middle of the territory, providing them with fresh, clean water. Froststar pounced on the ice at the edge and managed to break through after a few attempts. Birdkit set the moss in the water, holding it with a paw so that it wouldn't be carried away under the ice.

"Snowhare is sick," she said quietly as she kept her gaze on the moss. She heard Froststar let out a sad sigh.

"Snowhare was hoping to retire to the elders' den today."

"He still can, right?"

"Yes, but he wants to be there during the ceremony to retire with his mate."

"Understandably. Those two are inseparable." She purred at the thought of seeing Snowhare alongside his mate, Grassear. "She will

be happy to be with him in the medicine den, I'm sure." She picked up the moss ball and set it on the snow. She rested her chin on it and pushed it to her chest after laying down. She gently pressed against her chest and got up awkwardly, nearly falling back down as her paws sank through the snow more from the movement.

She shivered from the icy water soaking her fur. They turned around and were stopped by a yowl. They turned back around, Birdkit nearly dropping the ball of moss. A moment later a cat appeared from the other side of the slope on the opposite side of the stream. Birdkit recognized the cat as Oaktooth. Featherfoot staggered up beside him.

His eyes were glazed and his breathing ragged. His head was low and his tail dragged in the snow. "I found him by the Great Rock. He was out all night trying to get the catmint," Oaktooth explained. "He has been coughing for the past few days and he kept insisting he was fine. I see now he wanted to only take care of himself."

Birdkit felt worry for him wash over her. *Why do I care? He hates me!* She felt appalled. *He is sick! He needs help!* "Bring him to the medicine den. I will take care of him till Snowdash and the others return."

"You? Take care of Featherfoot? I'd rather a badger take care of him," Oaktooth scoffed. Featherfoot managed a glare and tried to make a retort but instead coughed up something onto the snow. Oaktooth made a face. "Come on, you fool. Let's get you taken care of."

The four cats made their way back slowly. Featherfoot was weak and Oaktooth kept him up by pressing against his side. Her father sank into a nest when they were in the medicine den. Birdkit gave water to Snowhare after waking him. Snowhare lapped gratefully at the icy water.

"Froststar, can you get some apprentices to help me? I need more soaked moss and fresh prey," Birdkit meowed as she moved over to Icekit to give him water. Icekit had just woken up from the poppy seed given to him that morning. His eyes were glazed with fever as he lapped weakly at the moss.

"Shouldn't Snowdash, Snakepaw, and Deerfoot be back by now?" Oaktooth growled as he looked over at Froststar. He was standing beside Featherfoot.

"They should have been. I will send patrols out to find them. Oaktooth, come." Froststar turned and exited the den. Birdkit soon heard her calling for a clan meeting. Birdkit finished giving water to Whitekit and trotted out of the den. She sat down at the entrance in case one of her patients called for her.

Froststar was on a branch, her eyes glistening with worry. "Our medicine cats are late. We have more sick cats and need the catmint they have gone to gather now more than ever. Birdkit is taking care of the sick cats but needs help. I want all apprentices to help her and do not disobey her. We cannot afford to risk losing a cat."

She flicked her tail as she looked at the sky briefly. Birdkit lifted her eyes as well and saw the sun was already sinking behind the trees. Froststar began to speak again. "Oaktooth, you know Lakeclan territory better than anyone else here. I want you to lead a patrol to Lakeclan to find Snowdash. Take Shardtail, Crowfur, and Alderbark."

Oaktooth gave a determined nod as the named warriors gathered around him. With a flick of his tail, he turned and rushed out of camp, his patrol close behind him. Shortly after they left, Grassear ran into camp, her eyes wide. Her fur was bushed and her tail lashing.

She ran to join the rest of the camp as the apprentices began to head for the medicine den. "What is going on?" Grassear asked Oakwing as she sat beside her.

Froststar answered for the queen. "Our medicine cats are late. I would like you to stay here with Snowhare," she meowed before Grassear could ask to join a patrol.

"What is wrong with Snowhare?" Fear edged her mew.

"He is sick and in the medicine den." Her words sent the she-cat running to see her mate. Birdkit jumped out of the way as the

apprentices moved aside.

"I am sorry to ask this of you, Oakwing, but we are short on warriors. Would you lead a patrol to Nightclan to find Snakepaw?"

Oakwing bowed her head. "I would be happy to. I would like to bring him home so that my kits can be cured."

"You are a strong queen. Thank you. Take Whitetail, Longfur, and Shortear."

Oakwing stood as the toms joined her. "Let's go." She turned and hurried out of camp. The warriors chased after her.

"I will lead the patrol to Wingclan." She paused, realizing there was a problem as she gazed down at the only cats left. "Honeygaze, Greatfoot. You will come with me."

Greatfoot stood, his tail high. "It would be an honor to serve my clan once more."

Honeygaze stood as well. "Shall we go?"

"I wish our clan wasn't so small," Froststar said before leaping down.

"With the newborn kits, maybe it won't be long before we are thriving like the other clans," Greatfoot purred.

"I hope you are right."

"Have you thought of taking a mate?"

"I have but it is not an easy path for me."

"You may be leader but you can still raise your own kits."

She let out a purr at the elder's words as she began to head for the entrance.

Birdkit looked at the three apprentices. "I need soaked moss and fresh bedding for Icekit and Whitekit."

Their eyes were full of awe and worry. "I'm glad you learned how to be a medicine cat, Birdkit," meowed Grasspaw, his brilliant green eyes wide. "We will do what you ask."

"There is moss you can use to collect water in the storage. Be careful not to disturb the herbs."

She followed them in and saw Grassear laying with Snowhare. The tufts of fur on the tips of her ears were all that defined her body from his. Birdkit padded over to Featherfoot after picking up the already soaked ball of moss. She pressed it to his mouth and he lapped at it.

She heard the apprentices run out of the den as she set the ball aside when he was done. Her mind was on what he had coughed up by the stream. *I will go investigate it after I give him medicine.*

As soon as Featherfoot was eating his herbs, she ran out of the den. She ignored the cold as she headed out of camp. She needed to know what it was that he had coughed up. It could help determine his sickness.

She slowed down after running through the territory for a while. Her lungs burned and she panted with exhaustion. She trotted the rest of the way and soon reached the stream. She stopped at the edged of the ice. It had taken Froststar a few tries to break it so it should be safe.

She carefully padded across and jumped onto the snow when she was sure she could make the distance. She heard the apprentices nearby and was glad they were doing as she asked. She focused her attention searching for where she had been earlier. After walking along the bank a bit, she found Oaktooth's and Featherfoot's trails.

She spotted what she was looking for. It was just as she had hoped. It was phlegm. She peered at it closely in the dying light of the day. A chill of fear crept up her spine as her fears were confirmed. Her father had all of the symptoms. He had greencough.

She backed away. Now it was even more urgent that the medicine cats returned. *I have to get the apprentices.* She ran toward their

voices, hearing them chatting about where the medicine cats could be. She soon came across them and they were startled by her running up on them.

"Hurry up with the moss and as soon as you gather bedding, I need you to hunt. We need all the prey we can get," she meowed urgently.

"It's worse, isn't it?" Lakepaw murmured.

"Featherfoot has greencough. I want to limit your exposure to it so leave everything I ask you to gather outside the den."

"Got it!" Mousepaw meowed as he held his head high and straightened his posture. "Together, we will take care of our clan like warriors!"

His words cheered up the dark atmosphere a bit. "Thank you," Birdkit meowed gratefully before she headed back to camp.

Chapter Five

Bluekit watched the apprentices go back and forth as she sat outside of the nursery. The sun had gone and was replaced by a full moon. Tonight was the Gathering but no cat in Snowclan would be going.

The patrols were still out and no word had come about their findings or their oncoming return. She found herself worried about the medicine cats. Sure they were harboring a liar but they were an important part of the clan.

She watched Birdkit drag inside each piece of prey brought to the den. She had seen Featherfoot go inside but she was against going to visit because of Birdkit. *She is probably going to poison him.* The sudden thought moved her paws. She pounced Birdkit as soon as she entered the den.

"You're trying to kill Featherfoot!" she accused as she glanced at a pile of herbs beside his nest. Birdkit struggled against her greater weight. Grassear growled as she got up from beside Snowhare.

She pulled Bluekit off of Birdkit just as Bluekit began churning her hind legs against her back. Fur stuck to her unsheathed claws and blood welled up on Birdkit's back. Grassear carried her out and back to the nursery as Bluekit struggled to get free.

She dropped her roughly once inside the nursery. Grassear was still growling. "Enough of your antics! Your sister is trying to help sick cats and you accusing her is not helping."

Heathertail lifted her head sleepily. "What's going on?"

"Bluekit attacked Birdkit," Grassear growled. "I will be staying here to watch her."

Heathertail growled. "Bluekit, how could you? She is your sister!"

"She is trying to poison Featherfoot!" Bluekit protested. Birdkit had

no idea what she was doing with the herbs. She wasn't a medicine cat!

Grassear shoved her with her head toward a nest. "Enough! She knows what she is doing! If you were paying attention instead of being selfish, you would know that she has started training as a medicine cat," she growled.

Bluekit huffed as she curled up in the nest. Grassear lay beside her. She tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable with all the worries about her father running through her mind. Grassear sighed. "Stay still, Bluekit."

"But Birdkit is poisoning everyone!"

Grassear smacked her gently in the back of the head with her tail. "Enough! She is doing no such thing. Get the absurd thought out of your head!"

Bluekit growled, annoyed that no one believed her. She curled up away from her and closed her eyes. *I will be proven right when a cat dies.* No one could deny her then.

She woke up to yowls of shock and outrage. Startled, she moved to Grassear and pressed against her belly. Grassear jumped to her paws and rushed to the entrance. Bluekit shook herself and ran to her side.

Oaktooth's patrol was back and pacing, their eyes wide. A patrol from Lakeclan was with them. The Wingclan apprentices were with Birdkit as Oaktooth announced their news.

"Snowdash's scent just suddenly stopped at the border. Lakeclan joined us to search their land for him but we came up with nothing. It's like he just vanished!" He swiveled his head toward the medicine den when coughing sounded.

Birdkit ran in to tend to whoever was coughing. Oaktooth looked at the apprentices as Lakeclan and his patrol surrounded him. "Did anyone else get sick?"

"No, but Featherfoot has greencough," Lakepaw answered. His

words shocked the cats and they backed away from the medicine den.

"But how? He hasn't been sick that long!" Oaktooth exclaimed, his tail flicking.

Birdkit ran out. "I need catmint right away! Icekit has greencough!"

Bluekit's fur rose as fear coursed through her. Was it another outbreak? She remembered a story about an outbreak a few leaf-bares back. Due to a snow storm, none of the clan could go to the other clans for help and what had started as one case of greencough turned into many.

Many cats died that moon. Last leaf-bare had brought a blizzard that had killed more of their clan due to fallen trees and greencough. Now it seemed they were about to see the end of their clan.

"No, please, no!" Grassear wailed, waking Heathertail. "Not again!"

Grassear shared Bluekit's fears. Bluekit pressed against her, hoping to comfort her. Oaktooth turned to one of the Lakeclan warriors. Bluekit recognized him as the deputy from when he visited during her first moon. His name eluded her.

The tom had large blotches of brown, white, and black all over his pelt. His green eyes were full of worry. "Oaktooth, I will head back and get Stopwater and his apprentices."

Oaktooth blinked gratefully at him. "Good idea. I'll send two warriors with you to help gather extra herbs along the way. Birdkit, teach Crowfur and Alderbark the herbs you need."

Birdkit beckoned the two warriors into the medicine den. Bluekit looked up when a snowflake floated in front of her. *Oh, no.* Her heart dropped as she saw more snowflakes. "Grassear, let's go back inside."

"Yes," she meowed quietly and stood. The two returned to their nest. Bluekit curled up against her, finding herself wishing Birdkit would do well in healing their clan. She sent a silent apology to

Starclan. *She is all we have. I will apologize when I get the chance.*

She woke up to someone prodding her side. She rolled over and tried to go back to sleep but the cat kept prodding her. "Bluekit, get up. I need to check you over." She recognized Birdkit's mew.

She then remembered the greencough spreading through the camp and forced herself to get up. She yawned as Birdkit began examining her for symptoms. Grassear walked in with a mouse and padded over to Heathertail. Heathertail was grooming herself while her kits slept.

"Thank you, Grassear," she purred. "How was hunting?"

Grassear set the mouse down. "Awful. The fresh snow drove everything into their holes. At this point, we will have to try hunting deer again."

"I doubt we can do that. We barely have any warriors with enough energy to spare for it." Heathertail's gaze was full of worry.

"Splashfoot brought Stopwater and Twistedpaw with catmint. We will be able to cure our sick clanmates and return to our normal life."

Bluekit tuned out the chattering queens as Birdkit gave her the all clear. Birdkit turned to go to Heathertail. "Wait."

Birdkit turned and looked at her. "What is it?"

She hesitated. "I'm sorry. About what I did. I was scared that Featherfoot would die."

Birdkit purred but her eyes were wary. "It's okay. Everyone is scared." She continued over to Heathertail, leaving Bluekit confused. Why was she wary of her? She laid down, wondering what she could possibly be wary of her for.

Birdkit left after she checked Heathertail and her kits. Bluekit got up and followed her out. The clearing was full of activity. Stopwater

and Twistedpaw were checking over cats returning from a patrol.

"Any sign of Froststar's patrol yet?" called Oaktooth from the entrance of the elders' den.

The Lakeclan deputy, having just returned, called back, "She is still gone!"

The fresh-kill pile was full of meager prey but at least the extra hunting was feeding the clan. She couldn't remember the camp ever being so full of cats. She raised her head to the weak sunlight. *That means they are still missing.*

A yowl sounded from the guard outside camp. "Oakwing has returned!"

Shortly after, Oakwing and her patrol padded wearily into camp. They were surprised to see Lakeclan within their camp and it was only the sight of Stopwater approaching that calmed nerves among them. Birdkit ran over to assist in checking them over for injuries and sign of sickness.

Bluekit realized that Birdkit was showing signs of exhaustion. Her speed was slow and her eyes weren't as bright. She watched her continue working as Oakwing began her report.

"Snakepaw's scent stopped in the middle of Nightclan's territory. We searched all night for him but there is no sign of him. It's like he disappeared into thin air."

Oaktooth padded up to her. "The same goes for Snowdash. His scent stopped at the border and vanished. Lakeclan returned with us to help with the greencough."

"Greencough?" Her eyes widened. "It has gotten that bad?"

Stopwater flicked his tail. "Yes. Birdkit was well trained by the three. She discovered the symptoms in Featherfoot and it showed up in the others. She has been working hard alongside us to make sure everyone is well taken care of." He purred when the kit passed him to get to Whitetail.

Birdkit pressed her ear to his chest, checking his breathing. Oakwing purred. "She might as well become a medicine cat. She has done so well. She has already delivered her first litter this morning!"

Stopwater paused and looked at her in disbelief. "Really?" When Oaktooth confirmed it, he turned his gaze to Twistedpaw. "Go check on the queens. Make sure they are fine."

Oakwing purred. "Heathertail is the one who delivered. I helped Birdkit. We now have four healthy she-kits."

Stopwater purred. "That is good. Still, I would like for her to have a third opinion."

Birdkit blinked at him. "Thank you. That makes me feel better."

So she hadn't been as confident as she seemed. Birdkit was so amazing. She seemed so collected with everything going on. Bluekit regretted the way she had treated her. Sure, she had a wild imagination but in the end, it had been what saved their clanmates.

Tonight she would share a meal with her.

That evening, a Nightclan patrol entered with Stagpool in the lead. The mottled medicine cat carried herbs in his mouth. The four warriors with him carried herbs and some prey. Birdkit stood from her place beside Bluekit and walked up to them.

Lakeclan and Snowclan watched as the kit greeted them. "Thank you for coming to help. Any sign of Snakepaw on your way over?"

Stagpool set the herbs down, his eyes full of sorrow. "I'm sorry but no. We looked as we traveled. It is so strange how his scent just stopped. No other scents were around his. So there is no possibility of an owl attacking him."

Bluekit felt sympathy for her sister when she saw sadness enter her eyes. "Thank you. Let me show you the medicine den." She began padding toward the den. Two warriors followed, their mouths full of herbs. Stagpool collected his bundle and followed.

The other two warriors dropped their prey on the fresh-kill pile. They mingled with the other warriors to talk about possible strategies of attacking the problem.

Bluekit returned to eating her mouse. Birdkit's mouse lay beside hers, barely touched. *She must be overwhelmed with worry.* She scarfed her mouse down before picking up her sister's mouse and carrying it to the medicine den. When she stepped inside, they were separating the herbs.

She set the mouse down. "Birdkit, you need to rest and eat."

Birdkit didn't look at her. "After this is done."

"Go on and eat, Birdkit. I will take care of this," Stagpool mewed. "You and the others can rest. I will take over the care tonight."

Birdkit hesitated for a moment and gave in. "Okay. Thank you." She picked up the mouse and carried it over to her nest. Bluekit followed her and laid down beside her. As Birdkit hungrily downed her mouse, Bluekit began washing her.

Birdkit purred as she ate. She pushed the remains out of her nest when she finished and curled up. Bluekit continued to lick her soft fur till her sister's breathing became slow and even. She had fallen asleep. Bluekit rested her head on her back, realizing that she missed sleeping with her. Her familiar scent wreathed around her, lulling her into sleep.

A wail cut through her dream of hunting. She stretched as she woke up, not sure if she imagined it. Another wail sounded and it was full of sorrow. She sat up as Birdkit shifted in her sleep. Stopwater and Twistedpaw were waking up from the wailing.

Bluekit prodded Birdkit awake. Birdkit sat up sleepily, having been so deep asleep that she could barely keep her eyes open. The next wail woke her up. Birdkit ran out of the den, Bluekit and the Lakeclan cats right behind her.

Stagpool stepped out of the nursery, one of Heathertail's kits

hanging limply from his jaws. As the cats drew closer to each other, Bluekit could see her eyes were closed. Heathertail and Oakwing padded out of the den, Heathertail letting out another wail of grief.

It clicked in all of their minds and Bluekit felt grief strike her heart. "Leafkit," she breathed.

Stagpool gently set the lifeless kit in the middle of the camp. Birdkit left to gather the needed herbs. Bluekit padded forward as cats began to gather, wondering what was wrong. Heathertail licked her kit's fur to smooth it out.

Stopwater looked over at Stagpool. "What happened?"

"She suddenly started convulsing and shortly after it started, she stopped." Stagpool's eyes were full of grief. "I had gone to check on them when it happened."

Twistedpaw sat down. "Such a sad loss."

Birdkit returned with lavender and other herbs Bluekit couldn't identify. She placed them on Leafkit when Heathertail finished washing her. Heathertail buried her nose in Leafkit's fur as the clans gathered to sit vigil.

Birdkit spoke up. "Leafkit was a life too young to take from us. She had a wonderful path ahead of her. Her life with Starclan will be free of hardships. May she enjoy endless hunting and love from kin and new friends. May she watch over us alongside our ancestors. Farewell, Leafkit, daughter of Heathertail and Crowfur."

Crowfur passed through the crowd and crouched beside his daughter's tiny form. He pressed his nose into her dark gray fur. "Goodbye, my love."

Chapter Six

Birdkit padded into the medicine den, exhausted from the vigil. Bluekit had gone back to the nursery to comfort Heathertail after Leafkit was buried. She sank into her nest, taking a deep breath of the scents of Snowdash, Deerfoot, and Snakepaw.

Her heart ached with loneliness. She placed a paw over her face and closed her eyes. She wanted to dream. She wanted her power to take her to their final moments before their disappearance. It would answer their questions and give them a solution.

She heard pawsteps entered the den. She felt her paw be poked. She moved her paw and looked up. Before her stood a she-cat with a starry white pelt and starry blue eyes. "Hello, Birdkit." Her voice was gentle. "Come with me. It is time for your initiation in apprenticeship."

Confused, Birdkit stood. "What do you mean? I'm too young!"

"There is no choice. The law must be broken. Snowclan's medicine cats are lost in the Dark Forest. You must take their place until we are able to return them."

Birdkit's heart seemed to stop. "The Dark Forest cats have them?" Snowdash had told her about them. Only the evilest cats resided there.

Her eyes glittered with worry. "Yes. They were taken on the edge of our territories. A kit saw the three being attacked and then dragged away. We are currently gathering our forces."

"Is another attack like in the other Clans going to happen to us?" she asked fearfully.

She hesitated, her eyes thoughtful. "I am not sure. Why they would choose those three cats is an even bigger question." She touched her nose to Birdkit's forehead. "Enough questions. They will be

answered later. Come, young one."

"Who are you?" she asked as she followed her out of the den.

"My name is Iceheart."

Birdkit's eyes went wide with excitement. "The great hero, Iceheart?"

Iceheart purred. "The one and only. Look."

Birdkit stopped beside her. They stood in front of the medicine den. The clearing was full of starry cats and they were even in the trees. Her eyes shined in awe at all of the ancestors that came to greet her. One stepped forward and she let out a breath of shock.

The cat that had broke from the crowd was a she-cat named Spottedbelly. She was the previous deputy that had passed a half-moon after Birdkit and Bluekit were born. She and Icepelt had been close.

Birdkit ran up to her and buried her face in her chest fur. "Spottedbelly, it's good to see you again!"

Spottedbelly purred and licked the top of her head. "Hello, Birdkit. I am proud of you."

Birdkit looked up at her with joy. It made her so happy to hear her praise. Iceheart joined Spottedbelly's side. "It is time."

Spottedbelly stepped back as the Starclan cats encircled them. "This is a duty for our clan's founder." The two she-cats returned to the crowd of cats as another bounded forward.

The new cat was a beautiful she-cat with white and brown blotches on her body and a half black and half brown face. Her left eye was green and her right eye was blue, just like Greatfoot. Birdkit purred as she bowed her head deep in respect. "Hello, Snowstar."

"Hello, Birdkit," she greeted. Her eyes were full of excitement when Birdkit looked back up at her. "You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Snowstar purred and held her head high. Her voice rang clearly through the air when she spoke. "Since the beginning of our clans, medicine cats have been an important part of our lives. They take care of us in our time of need. We are lost without them. Just as my clan is now. But no longer! Birdkit, do you swear to carry out the duties of a medicine cat even though you are an apprentice?"

Birdkit stood tall and held her head high. "I do."

"Do you swear to care for all cats, no matter the clan and if they are from outside the clans?"

"I do." All life was precious.

"Do you swear to do whatever it takes to keep peace and heal cats even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." She needed to keep balance.

"From here on, you will now be Birdpaw!" She touched noses with her as the cats around them cheered and chanted her name.

"Birdpaw! Birdpaw! Birdpaw!"

"We will guide you, Birdpaw. Be the voice that Snowclan needs in this dire situation, little one," Snowstar murmured in her ear. Her eyes shone with worry when she stepped back a bit. When the cheers died down, she continued to speak.

"Birdpaw, we will be with you. Each night, we will train you. Be prepared for the busy life of a medicine cat."

"Wait! What about the vision? About Bluekit killing our leader?" Birdpaw had to know.

Snowstar gazed at her sadly as she began to fade. "That question will be answered later if the situation arises. Do your best to steer the clan off the path shown to you for we cannot."

"Wait! Don't go!" She couldn't move as everything faded. She woke

up in her nest with a cry for them to come back. She lay there, feeling overwhelmed. There was so much she needed to know! She let out an annoyed snort. The answers seemed further out of reach.

She got to her paws and stretched, feeling rested despite the vivid dream. She sat down to wash. She listened to the mingled clans do their daily activities, occasionally hearing bits of conversations such as Oakwing organizing a bedding gathering patrol.

When she finished washing, the excitement of her new name returned. She checked on her patients and gave them their medicine before padding out to use the dirtplace. Cats greeted her as she passed them, making her feel important more than ever. They weren't as energetic as they had been before Leafkit died. Her death had brought a quietness to the camp.

When she walked out of the dirtplace tunnel, she heard a yowl from outside the camp. "Froststar has returned!" The announcement brought all activities to a halt and the clans gathered around to greet the leader. Birdpaw raced to be the first one to speak to her.

When Froststar padded slowly out of the tunnel, gasps of shock and horror filled the clearing. She was limping, Honeygaze and Greatfoot on either side of her, helping her along. All three of them were bloodied and wounded. Behind them entered a patrol of Wingclan, equally battered.

Birdpaw and the other medicine cats had the two help Froststar to her den. Stagpool went and gathered herbs from the medicine den. Froststar looked at Birdpaw when she began nosing her fur to find the injuries. "Birdkit, I couldn't find Deerfoot. His scent stopped shortly after crossing onto Wingclan's land from Nightclan's."

Stopwater placed his tail over her mouth. "You can report after you have rested. Let us treat you and you can sleep."

She sighed when he moved his tail. "Yes." She closed her eyes.

Birdpaw found a large gash in her shoulder when she rolled over. "I need cobweb!" Twistedpaw passed some to her, having finished treating a wound on Froststar's hind leg. Birdpaw chewed up some

of the leaves Stagpool brought in as they had treated her other side.

Stagpool joined her and licked the wound area clean. She licked the poultice into the wound, making Froststar let out a wail of pain. She pressed the cobwebs on the wound when she was done.

Together, the four medicine cats treated Snowclan's leader quickly and efficiently. They moved on to the rest of the patrol when she was asleep from a poppy seed.

Birdpaw went to Greatfoot. Twistedpaw took care of Honeygaze while Stagpool and Stopwater each took a Wingclan warrior. Greatfoot wasn't as bad as he seemed. He was very willing to report for Froststar when Birdpaw asked.

"We were searching where Deerfoot's scent ended when suddenly we were attacked by invisible cats."

The gathered cats were shocked by this but Birdpaw knew in her gut that it was the Dark Forest cats.

"Well, I guess you can't argue with those wounds," Crowfur mewed as he sniffed Greatfoot's scratched shoulder.

Honeygaze chimed in. "We had no chance. No matter what we did, we kept getting more damage given to us than we gave to them."

"And they were mocking us!" growled a Wingclan tom as Stopwater rubbed poultice into a wound on his shoulder. He had a black patch over his right eye while the rest of his fur was dark ginger.

"Darksplash is right," agreed Greatfoot. "They were going on about how the living could never defeat the dead."

"They were Dark Forest cats," Birdpaw finally said.

"If we hadn't just battled them, I would think you were crazy," said another Wingclan tom.

"But why? What reason do they have to attack us?" Darksplash asked.

"I will explain when Froststar holds a meeting," Birdpaw said in reply when she stepped away from Greatfoot. He padded away toward the fresh-kill pile.

"An explanation about your involvement with medicine is in order for now," Darksplash meowed, flicking his tail. "You're hardly a 'paw."

"Actually I am a 'paw," she corrected. All heads swiveled in her direction.

Stagpool, Stopwater, and Twistedpaw broke into purrs. "Congratulations, Birdpaw!" Twistedpaw meowed as he rubbed poultice into Honeygaze's wounds.

"How are you an apprentice?" Honeygaze demanded. "You can't just make yourself one."

"Starclan made me an apprentice. I am now your medicine cat until the others return."

"Oh," she mumbled, embarrassed for not thinking of their ancestors. "Congratulations."

Twistedpaw began the chant. "Birdpaw!"

"Birdpaw! Birdpaw! Birdpaw!"

Each cat joined, cheering for her new apprenticeship. It lightened the dark mood drifting through the camp.

Froststar stood beside Birdpaw a few days later. They were holding an emergency Gathering with the clans.

"I have an announcement. Or rather, Birdpaw does." Froststar stepped back to let her have the attention.

Birdpaw felt nervous as she began. "Our three medicine cats have been taken by the Dark Forest cats." She paused to allow confused meows to be made. When the gathered cats quieted down with a

flick of her tail, she continued. "I know you have many questions as to why and how. I do not have the answers yet. I plan to share with Starclan each night to gather these answers."

She swallowed back her fear when outraged cries sounded. Of course they were mad. Three important cats were missing and their ancestors could not provide the answers they desperately needed to make a move to rescue them.

"Hush!" Froststar ordered, silencing them.

Birdpaw glanced gratefully at her. "Iceheart came to me to bring me to the rest of Starclan. She told me that Starclan is working on going into the Dark Forest to rescue them."

"I hope they succeed! May the Dark Forest cats fall to the great power of Starclan!" shouted Moonstep, one of the Nightclan warriors.

The cry sent yowls of agreement through the camp. Birdpaw agreed. Perhaps Starclan *could* do it alone. Perhaps they didn't need her for that part. She hoped she wouldn't be needed for more than just relaying their voices. What about her power? *Why can't I control it? Why hasn't it happened lately?*

Her dreams had been empty of the past and it scared her. She focused back on the clans. She could worry about that later. "As for the attack on Froststar's patrol, every cat must be prepared for attack when they go out of camp! There is no telling when they will attack again and who will be attacked."

"We have to be careful when we go out? We shouldn't have to live in fear!" called out Ratface, a Lakeclan warrior.

"I understand completely," she yowled above the cacophony of angry voices. They quieted down. "But this is the life we must live now! Until they are taken care of, we must be careful using what little tactics we can. For now, the subject will be dropped. Froststar will take over." She stepped back and Froststar took her place.

"I was saddened to hear the loss of our newest member, Leafkit. She

will be missed as she walks with Starclan." She gave a sympathetic glance to Heathertail and Crowfur. "With the help of the other three clans, we have fought off the greencough!"

Cheers went up.

She continued to speak when they calmed down. "I-" She choked on her words, sorrow filling her eyes again. "I am sad about the loss of Deerfoot, Snakepaw, and Snowdash. I pray they are returned to us safely." She looked at Birdpaw. "You should announce the news from Starclan. It was your dream."

Birdpaw remembered the dream from last night. Spottedbelly had come to her with news about the patrol sent with Snowfeather. She stepped forward again. She balanced on the branch she stood on a bit shakily. The Great Oak seemed taller when one was in its branches.

"I have news of Snowfeather's patrol." When the last word left her mouth, the cats below seemed to hold their breath. "Windfire died saving kits from a fire started by a Twoleg. He walks with Starclan now."

The clans bowed their heads as they sent prayers up to him. Birdpaw saw the tom sitting in a tree across from her. Their gazes met and he bowed his head in respect. The stars in his pelt glowed fiercely for a moment before he faded.

After the moment of silence had passed, the anger at the Twolegs came. "Of course it was caused by a Twoleg! They are always causing problems!" growled Dustfur, a Wingclan elder. "There is never any good news about them."

"Windfire was a great warrior," meowed Fallenstar sadly. "No matter what the situation, you could count on him to keep peace and he made friends so easily among all clans."

Birdpaw heard the other leaders agree as she watched the cats below talk among themselves for a bit. She spotted Oaktooth slinking off into the forest with Clearwater and Eaglewing, both warriors of Nightclan.

"Froststar, call the meeting to an end," she hissed to her leader.

Her gaze full of confusion, she spoke up. "That ends the Gathering." She helped Birdpaw down as Oaktooth and the Nightclan warriors returned to the crowd. Birdpaw planned to confront him in camp.

Once in camp, Birdpaw stepped in front of Oaktooth before he could go to the warriors' den. He looked down at her in curiosity. "What is it, Birdpaw?"

She saw Froststar watching from where she stood behind him. Birdpaw took strength in knowing she was there. "What were you doing slipping away with Eaglewing and Clearwater?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I am talking about." She stood taller, challenging him to lie.

"I honestly have no idea what you are talking about." He was insisting on playing innocent.

She snorted. "Stop pretending. I saw the three of you."

"Fine. I was. We thought we heard cats calling our names."

She didn't believe him because his eyes showed he was desperate to escape with his secret. She widened her eyes, pretending to believe him. "Don't go toward the voices. The Dark Forest cats are trying to lure you away so they can take you like they took our medicine cats."

"I'll keep that in mind." He went around her and headed into his den.

"Froststar, he needs to be watched," she said as Froststar padded up to her.

"I will keep an eye on him. I hadn't noticed them trying to leave until just as I called an end to the Gathering. You would have made

an excellent hunter. Go get some rest. We will discuss the matter at sun-high."

"Yes. Goodnight, Froststar."

Froststar licked the top of her head before padding away to her den. Birdpaw went into the nursery to check on Heathertail's kits. They were asleep against Oakwing's belly, the queen curled around them. Their mother was out for a walk with Crowfur.

She sniffed each of the three kits and was satisfied when she smelled no sickness. Sleekkit squeaked when Birdpaw nudged her over to examine her front paw. She had gotten a cut from a sharp stick that had been missed by Lakepaw during the exchange of bedding.

Smelling that it was still free of infection, she padded out of the nursery. She paused at the entrance and looked at the full moon. Her breath billowed in the icy air. A star streaked across the clear sky. Even though her clanmates were all around her, she still felt loneliness sinking its claws in her heart.

She missed the medicine cats so much. She was just a kit with so many responsibilities piled onto her back. She couldn't even trust her own sister. Her sister wasn't talking to her again. She was jealous that she had become an apprentice before her but insisted that she was making it up. She kept calling everyone a mousebrain when it was brought up.

Birdpaw lowered her head. She padded slowly to the medicine den, ignoring the stinging in her pads from the snow. For just a little bit, she wanted to return to her days of being a carefree kit. Icepelt and Featherfoot taking care of her and Bluekit as they played with Icekit and Whitekit.

Why did Icepelt leave? None of this would have happened had she stayed, right? No. The prophecy still would have been revealed. Perhaps the other events would be different. She would never know.

Icekit greeted her from his nest. "Birdpaw, how was the Gathering?"

"It went well," Birdpaw replied before yawning. "I will tell you everything in the morning. How are you feeling?"

"A lot better than before. Thank you, Birdpaw. It's cool how you already have your apprentice name." Icekit was full of energy as Birdpaw checked him over. Both kits were doing better and were regaining their former energy.

"You'll be able to go back to the nursery in the morning. I can give you your medicine in there."

Icekit purred. "Great! Where's Oakwing?"

"She is watching Heathertail's kits while she goes out with Crowfur."

"Oh. I was hoping she would see me right away." Icekit sighed sadly. "She hasn't been able to see us because of all the patrols."

Birdpaw felt bad for him. "She will be in soon. Froststar has been limiting visits to try and prevent more greencough."

"Oh! I didn't know. That's understandable. What with all the stories about last leaf-bare, I am sure the warriors are scared."

"Yes, they are," she murmured, remembering a conversation she'd overheard. *Grassear and Crowfur were both covered in fear-scent.* "We need to be extra careful with our clan since we've had so much loss."

"I miss Juniperbranch," Icekit mewed quietly as he lowered his head. Juniperbranch was his father and had died from a snake bite after saving Whitekit from a snake that had strayed into camp.

Birdpaw got into the older kit's nest and curled up against him. Icekit rested his head on her back. She shared his pain of losing a parent. The memory of watching Icepelt leave was still fresh in her mind. Icekit began licking her fur and the rhythmic rasping of his tongue lulled her to sleep.

Birdpaw woke to someone prodding her awake. "Birdpaw, get up!

You're needed outside!" came an urgent voice into her dream. Birdpaw lifted her head, upset that her dream of her mother had been interrupted. She had been reliving her own past before Icepelt had left.

The cat before her was Grassear, her eyes full of fear and her fur bushed. "It's Froststar! She is sick!"

Birdpaw leaped to her paws and jumped over Icekit, who was still asleep. She ran out of the den with Grassear behind her. Froststar was laying in the middle of the clearing, convulsing and coughing something up. She ran to her side. "Froststar!" She didn't know what was wrong. She observed the liquid she was throwing up onto the snow and saw a berry.

She didn't know what the berry was. A gasp sounded from the crowd of anxious cats. Greatfoot bounded forward. "She's been poisoned!" he yowled. "With Deathberries!"

Birdpaw growled in horror before twisting around to run back into her den. She stumbled when she jumped through the opening, landing wrong. She righted herself and went into the store of herbs. What was good for poison? She hadn't learned of that herb yet!

A scent wreathed around her. "Do not worry, Birdpaw. I have given her yarrow. She would not be coughing it up if she had not had yarrow." The voice was that of a tom and she did not know it.

"Who are you?" she asked, turning around, thinking someone was behind her. There was no one there.

"My name is Sparrowpaw. I was Iceheart's apprentice."

"Thank you. Who poisoned her? Do you know?"

"No. We did not see who poisoned your leader. Our sight over the clans is darkening and we can see very little. It is up to you to now be our eyes and voice."

"What? How can you not see? Why is it darkening?"

No reply came as the scent faded. Birdpaw became more worried.

Starclan was losing its power. She really was the only one who do things. She needed help. There was no way she could do this alone. She turned back to her herbs. What did yarrow look like?

Suddenly she was surrounded by tall green trees and grass. Wonderful scents filled her nose as she stood up on her hind paws to see above the grass. What she saw took her breath away.

She was at the edge of a forest and past the tree line in front of her was a large hilly field of wildflowers that spread as far as the eye could see. She dropped down to all four paws and ran out of the forest. She broke free of the grass and trees and stopped, gazing in awe at the field.

A purr sounded beside her and she jumped, startled by it. She looked over and saw Iceheart. "Iceheart!"

"Hello, young one. Curious on what yarrow looks like?"

"Yes," she purred before remembering what was happening in camp. The sight of the beautiful land had erased her worries for just a moment. "Quickly, please! I need to be there for Froststar!" She dug her claws into the earth.

"Do not worry. Thanks to Sparrowpaw, she will live. He is watching over her for you as you learn this important lesson. It will surely come in handy if another incident happens."

She gazed at her, not sure if she could entirely believe her. Froststar looked like she was dying. How could she be all right? From what she had seen, death berries caused horrible pain.

Iceheart picked up a plant laying at her paws. The green stalk bore tiny white flowers. So this was yarrow. She sniffed it, storing the pleasant scent in her memory. She memorized the shape of the flowers so that she could search for it later when new-leaf brought fresh herbs. "Can it be found on our territory?" That was something she would need to know if she wanted to search for it.

Iceheart set it down. "There is no source available on your land and so we will provide it for you. It grows here in abundance."

Birdpaw blinked at her gratefully. "Thank you, Iceheart. It is very much appreciated."

Iceheart purred. "You are welcome. Now, return to your clan and tell them that she will be fine."

Birdpaw picked up the yarrow as the scene faded away. When she was back in the store, the yarrow was still in her mouth. She set it down and ran out of her den to return to Froststar's side. The she-cat was panting as she struggled to get up. "Oakwing, Grassear, help her to her den," ordered Birdpaw. "She needs rest. She will be fine. Starclan saved her."

Even though she had relayed Iceheart's message, they were still scared. "Who dared to poison the great Froststar?" growled Whitetail. He raked his angry gaze across the crowd of cats as Grassear and Oakwing helped Froststar to her den. Meows of protest answered Whitetail. Birdpaw kneaded the snow. Whitetail was right. They needed to find out who had tried to kill Froststar.

She ran over to the Great Tree and climbed up onto the lowest branch. She gazed at each cat, hoping to see signs of hidden truth. When her search came up empty, she flicked her tail. She would have to use her power tonight. Her mind wandered to Oaktooth. His action last night made her wonder if it had been him. Why would he want to turn against Snowclan? They had done nothing wrong to him.

She climbed down and went into Froststar's den. That would have to wait. She had a patient that needed her now. Froststar was sprawled out in her nest, her eyes full of pain. "Birdpaw," she rasped. "You won't believe it. Sparrowpaw saved me."

Birdpaw padded up to her. "I know he did. He came to me."

Froststar purred weakly as Oakwing and Grassear began purring loudly. Grassear's eyes shone with love. "My kit is still helping his clan even in death," she meowed proudly. Birdpaw couldn't help but purr. Their happiness was contagious.

"Oakwing, can you go get some soaked moss? She needs water."

Birdpaw began to examine her for more signs of poisoning. Oakwing darted out of the den.

Frostar coughed. "My throat hurts," she rasped.

"I'll go get you some honey to soothe it," Birdpaw meowed softly. "I spoke to Iceheart and she told me that I should use yarrow for poisoning."

"Iceheart spoke to you?" Grassear asked in surprise. "Did she say anything about me?"

Birdpaw was puzzled. "No, she didn't. I'm sorry. Did you know her?"

"She's my sister," Grassear meowed sadly. "We fought the morning before she died. I have never been able to find out if she forgave me after I apologized to her during her vigil."

Birdpaw touched her nose to the sad queen's. "I will speak to her tonight about it."

"Thank you, Birdpaw." Grassear blinked gratefully at her.

Frostar purred. "Iceheart surely forgave you. She loved you even if you fought like two crazy sparrows at times."

"You weren't there for that last fight." Grassear's gaze was full of regret. "I said things that didn't need to be said."

"Oh, I had no idea. I'm sorry, Grassear." Frostar managed to sit up and nuzzle her cheek. "Lay with me, old friend. Let us reminiscence the good days together."

Birdpaw purred as she trotted out of the den, leaving the two she-cats to talk while she got the honey. Oaktooth met her at the entrance. His eyes glittered with malice as he glared down at her. "How is she?"

"She will be fine," she meowed cautiously. She wasn't going to say who it was that saved her. A nagging feeling told her to keep that information to herself. The tom snorted.

"Who would be mousebrained enough to try and kill her? We need her more than ever in such dire times for our clan."

While his words rang true, she could tell he was putting up a front. She narrowed her eyes at him. She needed to walk his past to prove she was right about him being the one behind it.

"You think I did it?" Oaktooth asked, mocking horror. "Why would I take her life if she is such a kind leader? I respect her just as much as the next cat."

She couldn't stop the growl that emitted from her throat. He was playing with her! Oh, how she would love to claw his face for what he had done. The thought surprised her. She forced herself to calm down. She could easily have him taken care of through gathering proof and having him banished.

He thrust his muzzle to her ear. "You will regret saving her," he growled lowly into her ear. He gave her one last glare before padding away.

Birdpaw realized she was shaking. Oaktooth was scarier than she thought. She turned around and ran back into Froststar's den. "Oaktooth did it!"

They swung their heads in her direction. "Oaktooth?" Froststar meowed, narrowing her eyes.

"He confessed to me that he did it by threatening me." Birdpaw padded up to her. "You must banish him. He cannot be trusted."

Grassear looked doubtful. "Are you sure he wasn't pulling your tail?"

Birdpaw huffed. "I'm sure!"

"That would explain the poisoned mouse I ate," Froststar growled. "He has been very secretive these past few days."

"You believe her?" Grassear asked in bewilderment. "But he has never done something to suggest he would do this."

"Birdpaw and I saw him sneaking off during the Gathering. Two Nightclan cats were with him. And he was been seen sneaking out of camp through the dirtplace by the apprentices when they return from their nightly hunting."

"Froststar, why did you not tell the clan?"

Birdpaw answered. "Because he would know we were onto him and he would react."

Grassear lowered her gaze. "You're right. It's just hard to accept he would do this. He has always been such a great warrior for the clan."

"Not since Birdpaw was given special permissions," Froststar growled as she struggled to her feet.

"Froststar, he can wait," Grassear meowed, standing. "You need your rest."

"No, it can't wait. He threatened our medicine cat. That is inexcusable just as attacking me is inexcusable." Her snarl made Grassear step back.

"Yes, Froststar."

Birdpaw led the she-cats out of the den, Froststar's steps shaky. She held her head high despite her weakness from the poison. Once outside, a chilly wind blowing through camp pierced Birdpaw's fur and she shivered. Froststar took a deep breath and lifted her muzzle to the sky. "Let all cats old enough to hunt among the snow drifts gather!"

The cats buzzed with curiosity and worry as they came to crowd in front of the three cats. Froststar was still growling, her tail flicking. Birdpaw spotted Oaktooth come to the front to sit and watch. Their gazes met and Birdpaw held her head high. *You should have stayed quiet about your involvement.*

"I have discovered who has tried to poison me," Froststar snarled, her angry blue gaze going to Oaktooth. "Oaktooth, step forward."

The tom's eyes narrowed as he glared at Birdpaw. The cats began talking in shocked meows as the tom padded up to Froststar.

"Oaktooth, Starclan has shown Birdpaw that you are the one who tried to take my life through the use of death berries. You are hereby banished from Snowclan forever!"

He snarled. "You can't get rid of me that easily, Froststar. You don't deserve to be leader. You've made us weak to the other clans. You have no idea what you're doing. I can do a better job than you."

Featherfoot stepped forward. "I'm going with him."

Birdpaw stared at him in shock. "Why?"

This had surprised Oaktooth and the rest of the clan as well. Featherfoot rested his gaze on Birdpaw. "Why should I stay in a clan that relies on a kit for medicine? She is no use to us. For all we know, she could be making up these dreams she claims to have."

"She saved your life," Froststar growled. "Are you really going to push her away after that? Do you still blame her for Icepelt leaving?"

"It is her fault. She didn't stop her."

"You're the one at fault here. You didn't try to stop her either."

"She didn't tell me she planned to leave."

Birdpaw had to put a stop to this petty argument between her and her father. She padded up to him. "Featherfoot, I did everything I could to stop her. She refused to listen to me. Had I continued after her, I would have died in the snow. I was too young to be able to do much in the way of stopping her."

Hurt flashed through Featherfoot's eyes. Birdpaw pressed on. "Please, rethink your decision. If not for me, for Bluekit."

"I'm taking Bluekit with me," he meowed, making up his mind and ignoring her pleas.

Froststar wasn't going to have it. "You will leave her here!" she snarled. "You will not risk her life because of your petty beliefs!"

Bluekit bounded forward. "I want to go!" she said shakily, her eyes nervous.

Froststar rounded her icy glare on her. "You are going to stay here, Bluekit."

"You can't make me!" she meowed bravely as she moved to Featherfoot's side. Featherfoot picked her up by the scruff and turned around. He tried to leave but the clan blocked him.

"Put her down," growled Whitetail. "She belongs here, not with you."

Oaktooth pounced him. The two warriors screeched as they tumbled and fought. Oaktooth raked his sharp claws across Whitetail's face. Whitetail yowled in pain and began wildly attacking Oaktooth, unable to see. Oaktooth easily dodged his attacks but couldn't dodge Crowfur and Lakepaw.

The two synced up in attack as they backed him up out of the crowd of cats. Birdpaw rushed to Whitetail. "Whitetail, stay calm. Shardtail, Greatfoot! Get him to my den!" she ordered as she turned her attention back to Oaktooth.

The warrior had finally gotten his chance as Lakepaw stumbled over Featherfoot's tail. Featherfoot had joined them and was assisting his friend. Oaktooth pounced the apprentice and clawed at his exposed belly, his teeth in his neck. Crowfur was unable to assist him. Featherfoot had taken him on after setting Bluekit down. Bluekit took off, taking advantage of the confusion.

Froststar's cries for the fighting to stop were drowned out by the screeches of the battling warriors. Heathertail threw herself into Featherfoot, knocking him over just before he could try and blind Crowfur. Together the mates pounced Featherfoot.

"Get off of my kit!" snarled Grassear as she bounded forward. She sank her teeth into Oaktooth's scruff and yanked him off. Lakepaw

lay still, his blood staining the snow. His seemingly lifeless form made her yowl in grief and anger. She batted Oaktooth, knocking him down. She pounced on him, churning her hind legs, tearing up his belly.

Birdpaw was amazed and terrified by their skills. The moves were well done and deadly. She ran to Lakepaw's side and found he was struggling for breath. His throat was torn open. Birdpaw pressed her paws on the wound, ignoring the battling warriors. "I need cobwebs!"

Oakwing, having just returned, dropped the moss and ran to the medicine den. She soon returned with the cobweb wrapped around her front paw. Birdpaw took it from her and pressed the web to Lakepaw's wound. The thick web was soon soaked and she tossed it away before taking more from Oakwing. "Don't worry, Lakepaw, you can make it!" Birdpaw meowed urgently as Oakwing ran to help Grassear.

But her best efforts to stop the bleeding did nothing to help the apprentice. She watched with sorrow as the light faded from his eyes. Birdpaw stopped pressing on the webs and grabbed his scruff gently. She began dragging him out of the way of the fighting. Mousepaw came to help her and together they moved him into the shadows.

Featherfoot let out a screech and broke free of Crowfur and Heathertail before taking off toward the entrance. His fur was soaked with blood and it dripped onto the snow. The two warriors chased after him, Honeygaze and Alderbark joining them. Snowhare had joined Grassear in fighting off Oaktooth, who was being overwhelmed by them as other warriors scratched at him whenever he was in range. They were letting Lakepaw's parents get their revenge.

Oaktooth finally got in a good hit and batted Grassear away before dodging Snowhare and taking off out of the camp. Longfur and Shortear chased him alongside Snowhare. Grasspaw ran over to join Birdpaw and Mousepaw. He let out a wail of grief and pressed his nose into his brother's cold fur.

Birdpaw was surprised by the thick stench of blood that now permeated the air. She ran into her den to tend to Whitetail now that it was clear that the others would be fine.

Whitetail had fallen asleep from a poppy seed when Frostar slowly padded in. "How is he?" she asked softly, stopping at Birdpaw's side by his nest. Birdpaw stretched, stiff from from crouching and cleaning off the blood for so long.

"He should heal fine but he is no longer able to be a warrior, I'm afraid," she replied as she went into the storage to get more herbs. The other warriors who had been fighting Oaktooth and Featherfoot had returned and were waiting outside for their turn of treatment. "Can you go tell Longfur to come in?"

Frostar padded out, not commenting on her diagnosis of Whitetail's place as a warrior. Birdpaw knew it hurt her to lose a warrior. They were a small clan and every warrior was a much needed asset. As she backed out of the store, she heard Longfur's voice. "Is Whitetail okay?"

She turned to face the brown tom. She flicked her tail in the direction of the clearing on the far end of the den made for treating patients. He padded over to the spot and stood as she followed. She set the herbs down and began examining him for injuries. "He is no longer fit to be a warrior." She planned to let Frostar announce the news to the rest of the clan. Longfur was an exception. He was Whitetail's brother.

Longfur hissed angrily. "Oaktooth will rue the day he ever hurt Whitetail."

"How are Grassear and Snowhare holding up? Mousepaw and Grasspaw?"

"They're devastated. Grassear won't let Mousepaw and Grasspaw out of her sight."

"Understandably." She picked up a leaf of wintergreen. She chewed it up into a pulp before spitting it onto her pawpad and rubbing it into a scratch she had found on his back. "Did they find Bluekit?"

"No. They moved onto Nightclan territory and we were forced to stop chasing them."

"I will go tomorrow to deliver the news if Froststar needs me to. It would be best for a medicine cat to go."

"Are you sure? You should take a patrol. Featherfoot probably won't hesitate to attack you."

"I will. I may be an apprentice but I still am a kit." She stepped away. "There. Send in Honeygaze when you go out."

Chapter Seven

Froststar climbed up onto a branch of the Great Oak as the clans below organized into groups. Her heart was heavy with the loss of another warrior earlier that day.

It had been a moon since Oaktooth and Featherfoot left with Bluekit. The day after, Whitetail had retired to the elders' den with Snowhare and Grassear.

Icekit and Whitekit were now Icepaw and Whitepaw. They sat with Mousepaw and Grasspaw, their mentors behind each apprentice. There was no excitement in the way they hung their heads. She felt a pang of sympathy. Having just given their names that morning, they should have been able to go to their first gathering with excitement.

But the loss at sun-high was hard on them. She looked at the other leaders and saw they had concern in their eyes as they gazed at her. "Go first," Crowstar meowed gently.

The clans below waited expectantly. She took a deep breath. "I have grave news. At sun-high today, Oakwing joined Starclan."

Horrified and sad murmurs spread through the crowd as the other leaders hung their heads. Crowstar took it hardest and her claws dug into the bark. Oakwing had been her best friend.

"She had been sick with an unknown illness and Birdpaw could not save her. I thank the other medicine cats for their help in trying to cure her." She choked on her words and took a moment to regain herself.

"As you all know, Oaktooth and Featherfoot are now rogues. They took Birdpaw's sister, Bluekit, with them. I did not let Birdpaw relay specific information when she went to warn you. I was unsure at the time if I should allow it be spoken. But I have decided to tell you as I announce the new members of the elders' den."

She glanced down at the roots where the medicine cats and deputies sat. Birdpaw wasn't there to give her an encouraging look. The apprentice was with the elders, sitting vigil over Oakwing's body. She sighed.

"Snowhare and Grassear moved to the elders' den. Whitetail moved with them."

"But he is such a young warrior! Why would he move to the elders' den?" asked Fallenstar in surprise.

"I know. Oaktooth blinded him when he suddenly attacked him for standing up to Featherfoot trying to take Bluekit." The black warrior flashed through her mind, his face scarred by the attack. "He has recovered but will never fight again."

Her heart felt like it had shattered. Her poor clan was slowly dying out. "Leafkit, daughter to Heathertail and Crowfur, joined Starclan while I was away with a patrol in Wingclan territory searching for Deerfoot. She was only a few days old. She was delivered by Birdpaw while she was still Birdkit."

Sadness shifted through the large snowy clearing as if it could be cut through by a claw. "The day of the banishment of Oaktooth and Featherfoot, Lakepaw joined Starclan after fighting for Bluekit. Oaktooth took his life."

Appalled and angry meows filled the clearing. Froststar shared their resentment to the horrible act. Froststar hoped that what she was about to say would ease the anger and sadness. "At his vigil, I gave him his warrior ceremony for he earned it by fighting so bravely."

A cheer went up.

"I gave him the name of Lakeheart!"

The clans began chanting the late warrior's name. A glimmering in the tree across from her on the far side of the clearing caught her eye. She lost her breath as she saw Lakeheart gazing excitedly down at the clans. He lifted his gaze to hers and blinked gratefully at her.

Beside him sat Leafkit. Leafkit looked happy as she gazed at her. "I

will always love you as if you were my own kits," Frostar murmured, relief filling her body. She was glad they were safe but she wished they could still be walking among the living.

"A moment of silence for our lost cats!" called Icestar. At her command, all cats went quiet and bowed their heads, sending silent prayers to the clear starry sky.

When it was over, Frostar looked at the tree again. The two cats had been joined by Oakwing. She blinked at her, reassuring her that she would be watching over the clan. Frostar purred.

Seeing them had cheered her up. "I have good news as well. Snowclan has two new apprentices. Please welcome Icepaw and Whitepaw!"

The two apprentices lifted their heads when the clans began to chant their names. A bit of excitement seemed to enter them and they held their heads high. *Good. They should be happy about becoming apprentices.*

She bowed her head to Crowstar. "That is all for me." She stepped backwards carefully as Crowstar stepped forward.

"Leaf-bare has brought poor hunting to my clan but we are searching for more food sources. We have expanded our territory. This will only be until new-leaf. We also have a new litter of kits. Their mother is Beewing! Their father is Clawmoon!"

Congratulations went up from the cats below. Clawmoon, Wingclan's deputy, drew himself taller, proud of his new kits. Frostar purred. "Congratulations, Crowstar."

Crowstar purred. "I need to tell you something after the Gathering," she meowed quietly. She returned her attention to the clans. "That is all." She backed up and Icestar padded forward.

Icestar crouched on her branch. "Hunting has been poor for us as well. The lake is completely frozen as it is every leaf-bare. We have figured out a way to break the ice but even then the fish we find are few. We have taken to also expanding our territory. That is all."

As she stepped back, Fallenstar stepped forward. His eyes were sparkling with happiness. "Prey has been abundant for us. Many prey animals have taken shelter in our caves. I also have news of my own." He lifted his head high, a loud purr erupting from him. "My mate, Lizardfoot, had her kits overnight!"

Froststar and the other cats all congratulated the tom. *He had been looking forward to having kits with her. I'm glad things worked out between them after that fight.* She caught Fallenstar's eye and bowed her head. "Well done, Fallenstar."

"Thank you," he purred.

The Gathering soon ended and Froststar made her way down the trunk with the other leaders. Crowstar padded to her side when they reached the ground. Fallenstar and Icestar mingled with the crowd.

"So, what is it?" Froststar asked, seeing the excitement in her friend's eyes.

Crowstar leaned close. "I'm carrying kits!" she whispered so that only Froststar heard.

Froststar gasped in delight and erupted into purring. She rubbed her cheek against hers. "Oh, Crowstar, that is great news!" She looked at her as they sat down together. "Does Darksplash know?"

"No, not yet. I plan to go for a walk with him after this and tell him."

"He'll be very happy," Froststar purred, happy for her friend.

Crowstar sighed as she looked up at the sky. The full moon was bright and lit the clearing almost as if it were day. "If only Oakwing were here to share this joy. I will miss her dearly. She was always such fun to be with."

Froststar pressed against her. "I will miss her too. She was like a sister."

"Yeah, she was. She will always be in our hearts." The two she-cats

stayed together till it was time to go.

Frostar padded over to Oakwing's body when she and the patrol returned from the Gathering. It broke her heart to see her friend's form look so peaceful. She half wished Oakwing was just sleeping.

She crouched beside her with the rest of the clan and pressed her nose to her fur. "Farewell, my dear friend."

She didn't remember falling asleep. She was woken by Birdpaw nudging her shoulder. She stood and stretched out her stiff muscles. She looked over at the camp entrance, hearing pawsteps padding away.

The elders were carrying Oakwing's lifeless form out of camp for burial. Icepaw and Whitepaw trailed behind them, their tails dragging in the snow. They had been exempt from apprentices duties for a few days to allow them to mourn their mother.

Frostar sighed. Birdpaw spoke up. "I will give them poppy seeds to help them sleep when they get back."

"That would be best. It is such a shame that they lost their mother and father. I hope they visit their dreams."

"We can only hope," Birdpaw murmured. She looked up at her. "Eat something and then go rest. You need it."

"I should be awake, taking care of my clan," she meowed, worried something might happen while she was asleep.

"Things will be fine. Your clan will still be here when you wake up. I will make sure nothing goes wrong."

Frostar yawned, still tired. "Well, I can't argue with that. Fine. I'll eat and then get more rest," she mewed as she padded over to the meager fresh-kill pile. *My clan is at least able to eat this leaf-bare.* She chose a scrawny mouse and gulped it down in a few famished bites.

By the time she finished, she was even more sleepy. She got rid of the remains before going to the dirtplace.

When she stepped out, she spotted Crowfur dragging in a fawn through the tunnel entrance. Helping him were Longfur and Shortear. The three warriors were tired from the larger animal's weight.

She padded over, proud of them. "Well done! This will feed us for a bit."

Crowfur turned to her. "A large mountain cat killed its mother so we decided to spare it from suffering."

"Good thinking," she meowed before padding to her den. *While it is a sad thing to do, my clan needs to eat or we will die out.* She was happy to sink into her nest. She curled up, tired from everything happening to her clan.

She was slipping into sleep when she felt a cat join her in her nest. She purred when they began licking her back. She recognized Birdpaw's scent and it comforted her. She soon fell asleep, enjoying her company.

Chapter Eight

Birdpaw felt exhilarated as she bounded toward the lake. The new growth left wonderful scents in the air. The sun warmed her back in each small gap in the branches she passed through. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, making the forest seem like a magical land straight from Starclan.

She reached the stream dividing the territory and launched herself over it, clearing it easily. She continued running as soon as she landed. She let out a purr of happiness. She heard paws pounding behind her and she ran around a tree before looking back.

Froststar was chasing after her, her eyes full of life. "When did you get so fast?" she called, trying to catch up.

"Who knows?" she called back before picking up speed. Since she noticed new-leaf's approach, she had been full of energy. She had put the events of leaf-bare behind her. Things had calmed down after Oakwing's death.

She slowed to a stop when they reached the tree line, the lake glittering in the sun. Cats from all clans were bathing on the many large flat rocks around the lake. The warmth of new-leaf had brought more peace. She spotted some deer bounding away from the lake on the far side and she pricked her ears.

Her excitement died down as she looked for what had spooked the deer. Froststar came to stop beside her, panting hard. "You are so full of energy."

Birdpaw hardly heard her. Her eyes caught movement among some boulders. The familiar tan fur sent fear through her. "Mountain cat!" she yowled.

Her alarm made heads turn and lift from the warm rocks. When only a few realized what she had said and sprinted away, she yowled her alert again. The mountain cat had begun sneaking

toward two Lakeclan elders. *No!* She took off toward them, using her speed to reach them.

She yowled at them to run and one lifted his head. He froze up when he saw the mountain cat that was now in full view. A few other cats joined her in the race to the elders' rescue. The tom grabbed his clanmate's scruff and dragged him off the boulder just as the mountain cat pounced.

They fell over just in time, the cat's jaws snapping shut inches from the elder's paws. The cat hissed and growled as the two huddled under the boulder's jutting side. The patrol of clan cats, Birdpaw in the lead, reached them. Birdpaw didn't hesitate to pounce the big cat's back when it jumped down to try and get the elders.

It let out a terrifying yowl as she dug her claws into its back, working her hind legs, tearing fur free. The warriors joined her. Two attacked its face as two attacked its hind quarters. She recognized Darksplash as he joined her. He pounced on the cat, landing in front of her.

A yowl of pain came from a warrior at the front as the cat sank its teeth into him. Darksplash growled and began attacking the top of its head. The cat let go of the Nightclan warrior and yowled in pain.

It managed to finally shake Birdpaw and Darksplash off before running into the forest, blood dripping from its wounds. The cats panted as Birdpaw went to the fallen warrior's side. The thrill of battle ebbed away and was replaced by sorrow. The warrior had died shortly after he had been bit.

The power of the mountain cat's jaws had crushed his spine. The warriors and elders surrounded her and the lifeless warrior. Suddenly a wail came from behind her and a cat pushed past her.

It was Moonstep. Moonstep buried her muzzle in his fur. "Oh, Firestripe, why you?" she meowed thickly. The fallen warrior was a bright ginger with dark stripes running along his body. Blood stained his fur and the ground. Birdpaw and the warriors joined her in pressing their muzzles to his fur.

"He died saving us," said one of the Lakeclan elders quietly. "A hero. Thank you, Firestripe. May you enjoy endless hunting in Starclan."

After a while, Birdpaw stood. She looked at the warriors around her. Darksplash sighed as she recognized only Ratface. She had been missing Gatherings due to her training so she knew few of the warriors from other clans. "Darksplash, Ratface, take Firestripe back to Nightclan." The other Nightclan warrior stepped forward and pressed against the grieving Moonstep when she stood.

Birdpaw stopped him from helping her away. "Let me give her something for grief." The warrior waited for her as she trotted toward some goat weed. She gently plucked one of the oval leaves and brought it to Moonstep.

The she-cat moved her head away. "No, I won't have it. I'll be fine. I just want to go home."

Birdpaw passed the leaf to the warrior. "Give that to Stagpool and Rockface. They will be able to use it if she gets too grief stricken."

"Thank you, Birdpaw," he mumbled past the leaf.

"Anytime." She moved aside as Froststar came to join her.

"The other cats are safely away from the lake," she meowed as she bowed her head to Firestripe's body as it was carried away. "Such a sad loss. He was Moonstep's father."

"He died fighting like a warrior. He will be welcomed in Starclan," Birdpaw murmured. She sighed. "Sometimes I wonder if the founders made the right decision to pick this location."

"Our ancestors showed us that this was the place for us to thrive," Froststar meowed. "All clans face hardships. Ours just happens to be extreme." Birdpaw knew she was speaking of their small clan.

"Well, we have three kits ready for their apprenticeship. Or at least they say," she mewed as she remembered the energetic litter of Heathertail and Crowfur. The kits were five moons old and always trying to be made apprentices early.

Froststar was considering it due to their small clan. The two headed back to camp. "Well, that was more excitement than I needed," Birdpaw meowed halfheartedly. Firestripe's death was stuck to her like a shadow. No matter what she told herself, she couldn't shake off the feeling that somehow there was more to it.

The way the wounds were looked odd. Each time the scene replayed in her mind, the more the feeling grew. She needed to walk through his final moments when she went to sleep.

"Birdpaw!"

Birdpaw halted and looked at her leader, blinking as she came back to reality. "Yes?"

"Look!" Froststar nudged her head to the left and Birdpaw's eyes widened.

Limping towards them was Snakepaw. He was battered and bloody, each step an effort. Birdpaw sprinted to him and he flinched away. She skidded to a stop in front of him. Froststar stopped beside her.

"Froststar," Snakepaw rasped. "Who is this?"

"You don't recognize your special kit?" Froststar purred as she sniffed a wound on his shoulder.

His brown eyes lit up. "Birdkit? You've grown so much! How much time has passed?"

"It's been seven moons, I believe," Froststar meowed in reply. "So much has happened that I lost count."

"Enough. Let's get you home. We can talk after you've been taken care of," Birdpaw meowed, moving to his side and pressing against him. Froststar did the same on his other side and they began the slow trek to camp.

Snakepaw was purring loudly. "I can't believe you've grown up. You've become so beautiful."

The she-cats looked at each other in bewilderment over his back

before breaking out into purring, amused by his words. In truth, Birdpaw felt shy by his compliment.

When they came into view of the camp entrance, Longfur, on guard duty for the day, let a yowl of surprise. "Snakepaw has returned!" he yowled and soon cats were pouring out of the camp.

"Seems everyone is back from training," Froststar purred as they were surrounded.

"Snakepaw is back!" meowed Shortear jubilantly. He licked the top of his head. "Welcome home!"

Snakepaw purred loudly, enjoying the shower of greetings.

"Out of the way, please!" Birdpaw ordered. "He needs care! Mousepaw, get soaked moss. Icepaw, fresh bedding. Whitepaw, what's the fresh-kill pile look like?"

Mousepaw and Icepaw took off in separate directions to do as she asked. "It's full," Whitepaw replied.

"Good. Get the best piece of prey and take it to my den."

Whitepaw gave a nod and ran into camp. Snakepaw glanced at her. "You have gained so much respect while I was away. Is Icekit and Whitekit now Icepaw and Whitepaw?"

"Yes," she purred as they continued walking. "They are hard workers."

Froststar purred. "They take after their mother and father."

Snakepaw purred. "I imagine so."

Once in the medicine den, Snakepaw took a deep breath. "It is great to be back," he meowed happily as he sat down. Birdpaw began examining him, checking each wound. He was covered in deep scratches and he was tender in many places where she prodded with a paw.

"You are doing well in examining me," he meowed as he stayed still

for the most part.

"She is a medicine cat now. She has to be to do her job," Froststar purred as Icepaw entered with bedding, Mousepaw right behind him. Whitepaw joined his brother in making a fresh nest for Snakepaw.

Snakepaw was grateful for the water Mousepaw presented him. Birdpaw listened to his breathing when he finished drinking. "Breathing sounds normal. Heartbeat is normal."

When she lifted her head, Snakepaw touched his nose to hers. "I'm glad you took over in our absence."

She purred, feeling shyness wash over her. Her pelt burned as she went into the storage to get needed herbs while Froststar began cleaning his fur. She gathered them and carried them out. Snakepaw made a face at the taste of the ones she had him eat.

"I forgot how bad they taste," he said before sticking his tongue out. He winced when she began rubbing a poultice into his scratches.

"Well, get used to it because you'll be eating more later," she purred. When she was done, she helped him to his nest. He sank down into the soft nest, enjoying the feathers Grasspaw had brought in moments ago. Birdpaw shooed the apprentices out. "Let him rest!"

As Snakepaw began eating the fat crow Whitepaw had brought for him, Froststar stood. "I will go calm down the clan. Birdpaw, why don't you bring him to my den when he is rested?"

"Okay." She laid down beside him.

"And well done in fighting the mountain cat," she purred before leaving.

Snakepaw stared at her in shock. "You did what?"

Birdpaw held her head proudly. "I led a patrol of different clan warriors to save two Lakeclan elders being attacked by a mountain cat."

"Wow! You're very brave, Birdkit!"

"It's Birdpaw now," she corrected.

"What? How did you become an apprentice? Who is teaching you?"

"Starclan gave me my name and they teach me most nights." She purred but it stopped as she remembered all of the events. She sighed. "Today, Firestripe died helping us fight the mountain cat."

Snakepaw looked at his crow. "That is a sad loss. Poor Moonstep. He was all she had left."

Birdpaw felt worse about his death. If only she could have prevented it. The nagging feeling about the oddity of his death came back. She ignored it.

"Anything else happen while I was away?"

She glanced at him, wishing the news wasn't so sad. "Well, after you three disappeared, Heathertail kitted. Oakwing and I worked together to deliver four kits."

Snakepaw listened intently as she went on, murmuring sad words when each death was mentioned. When she finished her story, he sighed. "Such sad days for our clan."

"How did you escape?" she asked, unable to hold back the question.

"That is something I will tell at the next Gathering."

"Well, I'm glad you're alive," she purred as she rubbed her head against his. He purred, laying his tail over hers.

"It's good to be back. I'm proud of you. You have done well." His words made her feel shy again.

She woke up to inquisitive mews. "Is that really Snakepaw?"

"Yeah, he is one of the medicine cats that Heathertail says went missing before we were born."

And the kits have come to investigate, she thought in amusement. She opened her eyes a bit, seeing the three leaning forward to sniff the sleeping tom curled around her. His head was rested on her back, his breaths even and deep.

"Go back to Heathertail," she whispered, scaring them. The kits jumped high into the air and ran out of the den with wails of fear. She purred, finding it the funniest thing. Snakepaw's head shot up and he yawned.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. Just curious kits," she replied as she closed her eyes again. The warmth he emitted was comfortable. She was just about to slip back into her dreams when she realized he was burning up. Her eyes shot open and she got up. She felt his forehead.

Just as she thought. She went into the store and picked up feverfew. She returned to him quickly and gave it to him. He ate the leaf sleepily as she began checking his wounds again. Only one smelled of infection. From the smell, it wasn't bad.

As she applied a poultice to it, Grasspaw padded in with prey. Whitepaw followed him in. "Thank you," she meowed as she kept her gaze on the scratch. "Can you get soaked moss?"

"Yes, Birdpaw," meowed Whitepaw happily before collecting one of the balls of moss from the store. He trotted out of the den quickly. Grasspaw snorted. "Mousebrain."

Birdpaw gave him a glance of curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." He padded out.

"Whitepaw likes you," Snakepaw mewed before yawning.

"Well, that's too bad. I can't have a mate." She finished applying the poultice before working on the other wounds.

"True," he said sadly. "Sometimes a medicine cat yearns for a mate so don't be surprised if it overwhelms you."

"Do you love someone?"

"No, but I have wondered what it would be like if I hadn't chosen to be a medicine cat."

Birdpaw sensed he was lying. *I wonder who has his heart and doesn't know.* She licked the top of his head. "The whole clan is our litter. We are their mothers and fathers. In a way, we have what warriors have."

"Yeah, you're right," he purred. He began eating the one of the squirrels brought to them. She joined him when she was done taking care of him. She was happy to have him beside her again. *Please let nothing happen to him again.* She prayed that Deerfoot and Snowdash would soon rejoin them.

Whitepaw returned just as they finished eating. "Thank you, Whitepaw," Snakepaw meowed before lapping gratefully at the moss. Whitepaw gave a nod and looked at Birdpaw. "Allow me to clear out the remains."

"Thank you," she purred, noticing admiration in his bright gaze. He cleared away the remains of the squirrels before leaving them to rest more. The two cats curled up together. Her thoughts returned to Firestripe. *I need to find out what happened.* She closed her eyes. She was soon asleep and found herself watching Firestripe and his clanmate from behind.

They were fighting bravely. A few moments passed and a cat suddenly began to form before her. It was a scrawny brown tom, his amber eyes shining with mischief. He laid down beside Firestripe and the warrior soon tripped over him, falling over. The mountain cat caught him in its jaws. The eery yowl of pain came from Firestripe.

She forced herself out of the dream and woke up. It was just as she feared. The Dark Forest cats were causing trouble again. This time, they took a life.

She felt Snakepaw move beside her. "Are you okay?"

"I was just travelling in the past again." She let out a breath. It was worse watching the tom be killed than when she had heard it.

"About what?"

"Firestripe. He was killed by a Dark Forest tom."

Snakepaw growled. "Curse the Dark Forest cats. They're focused on getting revenge against you but are taking it out on all of the clans."

"Against me?" she meowed in bewilderment. "Why? What did I do?"

"They wouldn't say. For such a small number of cats, they're very bold. They would lose easily against the clans if there were to be a battle."

"I imagined there would be more."

"Our set of clans isn't as old as our sister clans. We have only been around for about twelve leaf-bares."

"That is still a long time and enough time for the Dark Forest to fill up with horrible cats." She dug her claws into the nest. They were probably hiding from him.

"They took us everywhere with them. I met every cat there."

"I am honestly surprised by this."

"Our clans are more peaceful than our sister clans," he noted as he stretched. He was right about that. Most of the time, the cats sent to visit them would bring back tales of fights and arguments.

"Why is that, I wonder?" she meowed. "Is it perhaps because we were all originally kittypets?"

"Maybe. We seem to have a more broad vision of things," he purred in amusement. "Though it would be nice to go visit them. Did Snowfeather return yet?"

"No, she is still gone. She should be back soon. It is new-leaf. I believe the next clan to go is Nightclan." They would send a patrol

over in green-leaf. She yawned. "It is the half-moon tonight. If you are not well by tonight, I will stay here."

"No, I want to go with you to Starpond. I want to speak with the other medicine cats about what happened." Snakepaw dug his claws into the nest. "Deerfoot and Snowdash are being held captive until you agree to not interfere with their activities."

Birdpaw growled at the horrible ransom. "I will not agree!"

Snakepaw looked at her with sad eyes. "I told them that but they wouldn't listen. They would torture us to try and make us visit your dreams to convince you to leave the clans."

Birdpaw felt sorrow pierce her heart. Snowdash and Deerfoot were being tortured because of her? "I wish I knew what they had against me."

"They don't know of your power as far as I know. Maybe your kin did something to them?"

"But why me? Why can't they let the past stay in the past? I don't know what my kin did!" she meowed, fear and anxiety coursing through her. Snakepaw licked her cheek.

"You should use your powers to find out. Finding out what they did will clear everything up."

She took a deep breath. "You're right," she said, calming her nerves. "I will do that when we get back from Starpond."

He pricked his ears. "I can go?"

"Only if you are feeling well enough by the time we need to leave," she scolded. He huffed in return.

Chapter Nine

Birdpaw and Snakepaw padded through the vine tunnel when night fell. Snakepaw had passed Birdpaw's check on his fever and she begrudgingly allowed him to go. She still felt like he should rest more. But Snakepaw insisted on going and wasn't going to be stopped.

Snakepaw let out a purr as they headed to the border they shared with Wingclan. "I missed this. Travelling to meet friends and share with Starclan."

Birdpaw ducked under a low hanging branch of a young pine. "Well, I haven't been able to go so I wouldn't know what it is like."

He stopped and looked at her in shock. "Haven't been able to go? What do you mean?"

"Starclan has been busy teaching me new things every night when I'm not exploring the past. I've been really tired." Her paws ached every day from her journies to Starclan and her body felt heavy from visiting the past. Mainly it was just useless bits of information so she often wondered why she had this power.

"What made you decide to go tonight?" he asked as they continued walking.

"I wanted to see Starpond for the first time."

Snakepaw's eyes shone. "It is magnificent. You'll absolutely love it."

"I'm sure I will," she purred. When they reached the border, a stream connecting to the one that divided their territory flowed quickly down the sloped terrain they stood on. She leaped across it and landed gracefully on the other side. She looked back at Snakepaw, wondering why he hadn't followed.

Snakepaw was gazing at her, awe in his brown eyes. "You are a lot

better at crossing than I was at first," he meowed before leaping across to join her. "I fell in because I was so small."

"You? Small?" She let out a purr of amusement. "You're such a large cat now!"

"Yeah, I was the smallest of my littermates. Guess I outgrew them!" He purred as a sadness flashed in his eyes. "I am happy they are watching over me in Starclan."

Birdpaw stayed quiet. *He lost his kin? I had no idea.* They continued their trek to the meeting place. They stayed close together, Snakepaw taking the lead.

Wingclan's territory was springy with many layers of pine. The tall trees shadowed the world beneath their branches. The fresh growth struggled to reach the sunlight. A night patrol passed nearby somewhere in the dark. Birdpaw felt on edge briefly before reminding herself of her place as a medicine cat.

She was still glad to be out of Wingclan territory when they crossed the border on the other side. They were now outside clan territories.

She then smelled the scents of the other medicine cats. She had picked up the scents every now and again on the way. "How much further is it?"

"Not far. See this broken tree?" He pointed his muzzle at a snapped sapling. "There are many of these marking the path. If you ever need to come to get away or get guidance, use these to guide your way so you don't get lost."

"Thank you for the advice."

He touched his nose to hers and she felt moved by the admiration and love in his eyes. "You're welcome."

They continued on, Birdpaw trying to figure out the turmoil in her heart. *Maybe I'm over thinking what I saw. We aren't allowed to have mates.* But she found herself doubting that. *Why is it that we can't love and have kits?* She would ask whoever came to her tonight.

The marked path curved up the slope a couple of fox-lengths from the border and flattened out at the top. The other medicine cats were waiting. Stopwater let out a yowl of surprise at Snakepaw's appearance. They ran the few fox-lengths to them and purred as they rubbed against Snakepaw.

"You're back!" Twistedpaw meowed happily.

Snakepaw purred at the greetings. "I have a lot to tell you after we share tongues with Starclan.

Stagpool's eyes glittered with anticipation. "I am eager to hear your story. Let's go."

They followed the broke trees, varying from saplings to young trees, to a secluded pond surrounded by thick trees. Stars glittered in the dark water. The moon had yet to hit the middle of the night sky. They had made good time.

"Well, we're early. I have an announcement," meowed Rockface, another Nightclan medicine cat. Stagpool gazed proudly at his apprentice, Lightpaw. The white she-cat was sitting tall and purring loudly. Rockface purred. "Lightpaw has finished her apprenticeship."

Birdpaw and the other medicine cats let out a cheer of congratulations. Lightpaw padded up to her. "It's thanks to you, Birdpaw. If you hadn't taught me about lungwort, we wouldn't have been able to survive last moon."

Birdpaw felt shy as the others joined Lightpaw in praising her. Blackfeather nudged Snakepaw with his head. "She is really a blessing from Starclan. She has taught us remedies once thought to be lost. She even gets visits from our sister Starclan!"

Snakepaw purred. "She is special." He sat down beside her at the edge of the water. "It is almost time," he meowed as he looked at the sky. The moon's light was beginning to strike some pebbles at the bottom of the shallow pond, making them glow a dim white light. She stared at them in awe. The scattered pebbles looked like underwater stars.

Snakepaw pressed against her. "Isn't wonderful?"

"Yes!" she breathed.

Before she knew it, the whole pond was lit by the pebbles. "It's time," meowed Coldtail, Stopwater's apprentice.

Stagpool led Lightpaw into the water and they stopped in the center. They turned to each other. Birdpaw leaned forward in excitement for their friend.

"Lightpaw has been an excellent apprentice. She has a natural ease of learning herbs and has discovered new ways of treatment. I am proud to give her name tonight."

Lightpaw straightened, her green eyes shining. Stagpool continued.

"Do you, Lightpaw, promise to uphold the ways of the medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between clans, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

Lightpaw lifted her head high. "I do," she meowed strongly.

"Then I present you your name before Starclan. Welcome to the life of a full medicine cat, Lightheart."

Starpaw started the chant first. "Lightheart!"

Stagpool rested his muzzle on top of Lightheart's head as the medicine cats cheered her new name. When it was over, the two stepped out of the water and joined their friends at the edge. The medicine cats each chose a place at the water's edge before touching their nose to the water's surface.

Birdpaw closed her eyes and soon found herself breathing in something horrid. Her eyes flew open and she saw she was laying in a misty dark forest. The ground was muddy and stunk of death. She jumped to her paws, shuddering at the feeling of the cold mud on her pads.

Where was she? This wasn't Starclan. She looked around. There was strange dark yellow light throughout the forest, wisps of mist

floating through the trees. Sparse undergrowth rotted.

"Welcome to my home, Birdpaw," meowed a smooth deep voice behind her. She spun around and came face to face with a black tom with amber eyes. He had a scar down his chest and his ears were cut in many places. "My name is Darkclaw."

"Why am I here? What is this place?" Birdpaw stammered, afraid of this huge tom.

He purred. "This is the Dark Forest. Would you like me to show you around?"

An idea struck her just before she denied him. *I could save Deerfoot and Snowdash!* "Sure."

His amber eyes flashed in surprise. "Really? I thought you would say no."

She narrowed her eyes. *He planned to take me against my will.* "I am curious about this place."

"Then follow me."

"Birdkit!" A familiar voice called her old name from behind her. She turned around and saw Deerfoot and Snowdash with three toms. The three toms were a pale cream with splashes of brown and black. They shared blue eyes. The medicine cats were covered in wounds and blood.

Darkclaw let out a growl and pounced her, pinning her to the gross ground. "Did you think you were going to help them?" he growled in her ear. She struggled against his greater weight and strength.

"Let her go!" yowled Snowdash. He received a scratch on the face from one of the toms.

"Be quiet, stupid medicine cat," he growled. Darkclaw sank his claws into her flesh. She winced.

"What do you want with me?" she growled.

"I want you to suffer just like we did. You and all of your kin will be killed. You oppress us and take all of the power over the clans. Eliminating you first will mean that you can't heal them but since it is weak to kill such a weak cat, we give you the option to walk away from the clans," he growled.

She looked at her friends helplessly. "What happens if I disagree?"

"We kill your friends in front of you. The other medicine cats are next."

"What happens if I agree?"

"We will let them go."

"Promise not to hurt them anymore? If I leave?" She wanted to save them no matter what.

He didn't reply for a moment. "Fine. If you talk to your kin in each clan and tell them to step down."

"I don't know who they are." She hadn't even known she had kin in the other clans.

"Then I will tell you. The leaders and the deputies are your kin. You're the first one to become a medicine cat and so we are stopping you from having such a place in the clan."

The tom sounded crazy but Deerfoot's and Snowdash's gaze confirmed his words. "But what about the law against that?"

"Your kin broke that law when they founded the clans here. I was with Snowstar when she founded Snowclan. She made her brother deputy even though I was the better option. When I challenged Swallowtail, he failed in fighting like a warrior and I killed him easily. Snowstar then banished me."

Birdpaw felt horrified. "You killed him! Of course you would be banished."

"She should have made me deputy!" he snarled before she felt searing pain in her neck. He was biting her! She yowled in pain.

"Stop! Don't kill her!" Snowdash pleaded.

Darkclaw let her go and she felt blood staining her fur. She panted, finding it hard to breathe. Was she going to die? She closed her eyes. She felt the mud disappear and felt water hit her face before her head was underwater.

She was quickly pulled out but it seemed faraway. "Birdpaw!" She recognized Snakepaw's worried voice. *I'm sorry, Snakepaw. I tried....*

"Oh, Birdpaw, my dear kin."

Birdpaw opened her eyes and saw Snowstar standing before her. She was now in tall green grass, the sun shining in the sky and a gentle breeze blowing. The sun dappled them through the leaves of the trees around them.

Birdpaw felt no more pain and fear set in. "Am I...dead?"

Snowstar's eyes were full of sadness. "No, we are keeping from dying. How did this happen? Why did you not come here?"

"Darkclaw took me to the Dark Forest," she meowed as she lifted her head. "Deerfoot and Snowdash are still alive but hurt. Darkclaw did this to me. He got mad that I agreed with your decision on banning him from the clan."

Her gaze clouded with sorrow. "He killed my brother. I couldn't forgive him for that. He was too power hungry. He even wanted to take over the other clans. He used to be so sweet."

Birdpaw sensed a history behind the two cats. "You were mates?"

"Yes, before the clans. We did not have kits together though. Shortly after we became mates, I became the founder of Snowclan. That's when he changed." She sat down and looked up at the blue sky.

"I wanted to make him deputy but he was too rough with the other cats when it came to training. Sparrowtail was the one everyone respected and it was decided by all but Darkclaw that he would be our first deputy." Sadness filled her voice.

"I ended up being the one to kill him when he attacked my hunting patrol to try and kill me."

Birdpaw felt sympathy for the she-cat. "Because he couldn't let go of the past."

Snowstar looked down at her. "Yes. I was lucky for the time being that he did not know about my kits. He did not know I had taken Mapleface as a mate." Her eyes filled with love at the memories. "I will introduce you when a better time arises."

Birdpaw sighed. "I have to ask you something."

"Yes?"

She hesitated. She felt like she should know the answer. "Why is it that medicine cats can't have mates?" she finally asked after a few moments.

"Well, think about it. If a medicine cat is worried about their mate and kits, they prioritize them above the rest of the clan and other cats. This hinders their job as a healer and could cost a life. The first medicine cat, Moth Flight, learned this the hard way and was the one to make the law."

Birdpaw finally understood. Snakepaw entered her mind. "What about love? Even if we don't take that cat as a mate?"

"You must block it and think of them as your kit. Just as all of the clan are your kits."

"You must spread your love equally," Birdpaw mewed, completely understanding. It was such a sad life to lead. To not be able to have kits or a mate was a hard thing to live with. How did so many cats live with that thought in mind?

"You need to return to your clan," Snowstar meowed. "Your wound has healed. You still have much to do."

Birdpaw bowed her head. "Thank you, Snowstar."

"You are welcome, my dear," she purred.

Birdpaw suddenly remembered more of Darkclaw's words. The world was beginning to fade as she stared desperately at Snowstar. "Is it true? Are the other deputies and leaders our kin?"

Snowstar blinked. "Yes, that is true. Darkclaw told you?"

"Yes! Why? That is breaking one of the laws of the code!"

"I will explain later," she replied. She was now just a wisp.

"Why not now?" Birdpaw wailed as the queen disappeared.

Birdpaw woke up by Starpond, the other medicine cats surrounding her with worried eyes. She felt something on her neck as she sat up a bit, upset that she could not get all of the answers in one visit to Starclan.

"Birdpaw, can you stand?" Snakepaw entered her vision. There was blood on his paws. "What happened? Did the Dark Forest cats get you?" His eyes were wide with fear.

"Yes," she meowed. She felt dizzy as she got up. She swayed and Snakepaw pressed against her side. Twistedpaw did the same on her other side. "I will explain to you at the Gathering. I want to rest right now."

Stagpool stopped them from walking away by blocking their path. "She needs to rest. It's too long of a walk to her camp."

"Stagpool is right," mewed Blackfeather. "Let's take her to my camp. She can rest in my den until she is well enough to go home."

"I'm fine," Birdpaw mewed. "I'm just dizzy."

"You've lost a lot of blood," Lightheart meowed. "You need to rest and have that taken care of."

She couldn't argue against all of them. She really just wanted to sink into a nest and sleep.

When the large group of medicine cats came into view of the entrance to Wingclan's camp, the guard stood and ran over. "What

happened to Birdpaw?"

She recognized him as Pinefoot. The mottled tom sniffed her neck. "Were you attacked by rogues?"

"Yes," Rockface meowed quickly. Birdpaw was grateful for the lie. She didn't have the energy to deal with a panicked clan asking questions.

"I'll go tell Crowstar," Pinefoot growled. He dashed into camp. The medicine cats continued on slowly.

Birdpaw's legs shook with each step and she had often stumbled on the way to the camp. Crowstar was running to them as they entered camp. "Pinefoot told me the news!" Her words stopped at the sight of Birdpaw's stained neck fur. "Oh, Birdpaw!"

"I'm fine," Birdpaw assured her. "It isn't as serious as it looks."

"Are you sure?" the leader stammered. "That looks really serious to me!"

"She just needs rest," meowed Blackfeather. "I'm sure she'll be fine. We treated her after the attack."

"If you say so." She was still obviously unsure.

Birdpaw was happy to be laying down after they entered the medicine den on the far side of camp. The nest was comfortable. Snakepaw curled around her. "Rockface, could you go to Snowclan and tell Frostar what happened?" he asked.

Rockface gave a nod. "Rest easy, Birdpaw," he mewed before leaving.

The other medicine cats said their farewells and left. Blackfeather checked her neck. "It healed?"

Snakepaw looked at him. "What?"

"Her wound is healed," Blackfeather mewed.

"Starclan healed me while I spoke with Snowstar," Birdpaw meowed, wanting to be left alone.

"Oh. Well, I'm glad they did. I would hate to lose you," Blackfeather mewed with relief. "You are an amazing medicine cat and a great friend."

Snakepaw murmured his agreement. Birdpaw rested her head on her paws and Snakepaw rested his head on her back. "Get some rest," he mewed quietly.

Blackfeather got into his own nest and began washing. Birdpaw listened to Snakepaw's quiet purring, her thoughts drifting to what Darkclaw said. Snowstar had confirmed what had been hidden from her. So why did the clans break the law of not allowing the leadership to be held by one line of kin?

She closed her eyes and banished her thoughts. That was something she planned to find out tomorrow. For now, she needed sleep.

Chapter Ten

Sleep did not come to her. Instead, the world around her faded away and was replaced with hot air and the yowls of cats in fear and pain. She opened her eyes, reminded of her first vision from Starclan. It was the same vision as before. Fire was claiming the forest and cats were panicking everywhere.

Bluekit was standing over Froststar like before. Birdpaw felt the familiar fear as Bluekit hovered over their leader. This didn't make any sense. Bluekit had left with Oaktooth and Featherfoot. Why was the vision still showing her Bluekit being the one to kill Froststar?

Birdpaw quickly understood. Bluekit would be coming back. That meant she was either caught, came to attack, or wanted to return. And behind her reasons for killing Froststar was no doubt Birdpaw herself, Oaktooth, and Featherfoot. Birdpaw dug her claws into the dirt and was surprised to find she could move this time.

She pushed herself forward toward the two she-cats. Bluekit was meowing something to her. Just as she raised her paw to do the final part of the vision, Birdpaw jumped and slammed into her, knocking her away from Froststar. Shocked by the ability to actually touch her, she couldn't prepare for the tumbling when they fell together. She was smashed by Bluekit when they rolled over.

Bluekit got off of her and got up. Birdpaw got to her feet as well and shook the dirt off of her fur. Bluekit glared at her. "Why did you stop me?" she demanded.

"Because she doesn't deserve to die!" Birdpaw growled.

"Yes, she does! She is weak! She lets the other clans take our territory and prey!"

What? What is she talking about? Birdpaw gave her an incredulous

look. Before she could speak, everything wavered and vanished. Birdpaw was confused. Was the vision over already? But she needed to know what she meant! She was so close to learning more about the future!

Suddenly she was in among a crowd of cats. They were standing in a cave with an opening in the ceiling that let in sunlight. The light revealed many openings in the cave walls.

She didn't recognize any of the cats as she looked at them. A growl dragged her attention to two toms glaring at each other in the middle of the camp. The clan was surrounding them, eyes glittering with anticipation and worry.

One tom was mottled and the other had ginger fur.

"Stand down, Flamepelt!" growled the mottled tom.

"Never! You're the one who needs to stand down, Nightstar!" Flamepelt snarled.

Birdpaw leaned forward. Nightstar was the founder of Nightclan. She was in Nightclan? Nightstar's eyes glittered with anger. "Flamepelt, stand down." His voice was icy.

"No! I will not. Hawkfur doesn't deserve to be deputy. I do!" Flamepelt raked his gaze across the cats surrounding them. "Tell Nightstar I am right. Stand with me against this tyranny!"

The cats instead moved away.

Nightstar snorted in victory. "They will not be fooled by your outrageous claim. Now, leave. You are hereby banished from Nightclan!"

"You cannot banish me if you are not leader!" Flamepelt yowled and pounced him. The two toms fought a skilled battle. The other cats cheered on Nightstar. Birdpaw found herself cheering with them. Nightstar was a legendary leader like his kin. She knew the good outcome of all of his leadership. These cats did not. Not yet.

Nightstar soon had Flamepelt fleeing camp with his ear ripped in

half. Nightstar held his head high. "Don't ever come back!" he called after him. The clan sent up their cheers of victory.

"Long live Nightstar!" they called.

Birdpaw itched to know why her kin was claiming all of the power once the excitement of the battle wore off. The clan went back to their duties. A tom started giving orders and she guessed he was Hawkfur. Nightstar padded toward an opening. Birdpaw quickly followed him. "Nightstar!" she called, hoping her voice could be heard.

The tom paused and turned around, his green gaze resting on her as she trotted up to him. "Who are you? How did you get in here?" he growled, getting into a defensive stance, his fur rising. She stopped a few tail lengths away.

She thought quickly, anxious to avoid a fight that could possibly end her life. She didn't want a repeat of what happened with Darkclaw. She swallowed back her fear to try and steady her voice. "I am from Starclan. I was a medicine cat apprentice. My name is Birdpaw."

Nightstar's eyes narrowed. "What? Impossible. You don't look like a Starclan cat. Where are the stars that make your pelt?"

"I had to make my form solid to appear to you better. I am new to visiting the living." *He probably won't believe that.* She was just saying things that came to mind.

She was right. There was doubt in his eyes. "Why are you here?"

At least he was giving her a chance to speak. "I first need to tell you why I am here. I am your kin later on in the future. I live in Snowclan."

"From the future?" He took a step forward. "You take me for a fool?"

"Please, listen, Nightstar! I am not lying! Just hear me out!" she begged. When he didn't reply, she continued. "I came because our future is grim. Cats are after our kin because they are upset about our kin taking all of the power in each of the four clans."

"Just like Flamepelt?" he growled.

"Yes! And Darkclaw!"

His gaze moved to her neck. "Your fur. It's covered in blood. Are you hurt?"

"I was by Darkclaw. He roams in the Dark Forest now. He tried to kill me so that our kin couldn't have more power among the clans. Starclan healed me. Snowstar healed me. She came to me and told me about her once being mates with Darkclaw."

Nightstar's eyes widened. "That was a secret. You are telling the truth."

Why had it been a secret? She pushed the question out of her mind. Time to get to the point. "Why is it that our kin are only allowed to have power over the clans? Why break that law?"

"I will answer that in my den. Follow me." He turned around and entered the opening he'd been heading towards. She followed him, the darkness swallowing them. He led her down a tunnel that was short and opened up into a room. A hole yawned open in the ceiling and a pile of flattened dirt created a path up to it as an exit.

Nightstar sat in his nest against the far wall and looked at her. "We are a new set of clans. My littermates and I got together and discussed about the leadership. We agreed it would be best if we allow only our kin, after special training, to rule the clans until we were ready to move on to allowing other cats a chance. We don't want our clans to end so shortly after being founded."

Birdpaw found she understood. But the broken law had come to bite them. "Now, in my time, Dark Forest cats are causing problems because of your agreement. They've taken three of Snowclan's medicine cats hostage. One escaped and now we must rescue the other two. And it isn't just the medicine cats being targeted. They are attacking anyone who is with our kin."

Nightstar growled. "I shall talk about this with my littermates." His eyes widened. "You're disappearing!"

"What?" She looked down at her paws and was shocked that she could see through them to the rock beneath them. "No! I need to stay! That means it's time for me to wake up!"

"Birdpaw!" A voice echoed in her mind. "Birdpaw, get up!" The voice was urgent.

Nightstar and the cave around him vanished. She opened her eyes and looked up to see Snakepaw gazing at her anxiously. "What's wrong?" she asked, standing. He looked over at Blackfeather. She followed his gaze. Her blood ran cold. Blood soaked the nest as the stench of blood struck her. The tom wasn't breathing. His eyes were open and clouded with the look of death.

"Blackfeather!" she wailed. "What happened to him?"

"I woke to him like this. I don't know what happened!" Snakepaw meowed, his voice trembling. "It was probably the Dark Forest cats." He kneaded the earth with his claws. "We're not safe anywhere."

There was only one way to find out. She laid back in her nest. "I'm going into his past to the last moments of his life."

"What? How? He was killed in his sleep!" Snakepaw looked at her, confusion and disbelief in his gaze.

"I have to try. Go tell his clan." She closed her eyes as the tom ran out of the den. She forced herself back into sleep. With luck, she would end up where Blackfeather had been in his last moments.

And luck she had. She opened her eyes when a familiar horrid smell hit her nostrils. She was in the Dark Forest again. Blackfeather was being attacked by Flamepelt. She snarled, unable to stop herself. She jumped at Flamepelt and landed on his back. She sank her claws into his back and bit his neck. She churned her hind legs, ripping his back up.

The former Nightclan warrior yowled in pain and let go of Blackfeather. He backed up, trying to shake her off. She hung on, the hurt of losing her friend carrying her on endless bravery. *This is for Blackfeather!* She let go when Flamepelt rolled, crushing her

beneath his weight. She quickly got up before he could recover from finally getting free of her. She pounced him again, this time knocking him down and pinning him.

She placed a paw on his chest and dug her claws into him as she used her newfound strength to hold him down. "I will not stand by while you try and ruin the lives the clans have worked hard to get!" She leaned down and sank her teeth into his throat. Blood gushed into her mouth and she gagged but forced herself to hold on.

She heard Blackfeather call her name but it sounded far away. When Flamepelt stopped moving beneath her, she let go and backed away. She watched the cat fade away. She turned to Blackfeather, realizing what she had done with horror. She had killed a cat. She, a medicine cat, had taken a life.

Blackfeather was just as shocked as they stared at each other. After some time passed, he padded up to her and rubbed his face against hers. "You saved my life, Birdpaw. Thank you so much!" His mew was full of relief and gratefulness. "I was sure I would be killed."

They looked back at where Flamepelt had been. Blood still stained the ground. "I can't believe I killed him," Birdpaw mewed weakly before letting out a shuttering breath. "I am a medicine cat! I am not supposed to kill!"

"But that is part of being a medicine cat. There are times when it is necessary for us to be the one to end a life. You were faced with that moment and did it to save me and other cats that were to be his victims in the future."

She swallowed, her mouth dry. It still didn't make it better. She still ended a life. Even if he was already dead. *Already dead.* She had given him a second death! She looked at Blackfeather, eyes wide. "We can kill them a second time!"

It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about. "You're right! It isn't as bad as we thought. We can fight and win!"

She then remembered what waited for her when she woke up. "I may have changed the past but it won't do anything. This is a

dream. You're still dead," she meowed sadly, wishing she could save him.

Blackfeather gave her a confused look. "I'm already dead? But I'm alive and with you, right?"

"No, Blackfeather. I only came to find out how you had been killed."

He looked down at the ground, sadness filling his eyes. "I wish I could continue in your journey against the Dark Forest cats," he meowed after a moment. He looked back at her. "Promise me you'll pass me on?"

"I promise." They touched noses as her dream began to fade.

When she opened her eyes, Crowstar, Snakepaw, and Clawmoon were standing in front of the nests. Their eyes were trained on Blackfeather's nest. Movement came from Blackfeather's nest and she looked over. The medicine cat was sitting up, confusion filling his gold eyes. "But I thought I was dead."

He looked at Birdpaw and they stared at each other. "How?" he breathed.

Birdpaw jumped to her feet. "I saved you! But I thought I couldn't!"

He stood and purred. "Well, whatever happened, I'm glad! Thank you, Birdpaw!" He moved to her side and rubbed his cheek against hers. She purred.

"What did you do, Birdpaw?" Crowstar asked when they moved apart.

"I went into the past and stopped Flamepelt from killing Blackfeather. I guess doing that reversed the effects of Flamepelt's attack and saved Blackfeather."

"Wait. You can go in the past?" Clawmoon stepped forward, his eyes glittering with curiosity. "Crowstar, do you remember what our mother and father told us? Before you and I became leader and deputy?"

"Yes, I do," she mewed thoughtfully. "Birdpaw, did you speak to Nightstar?"

"Huh? How did you know?"

"Well, our mother and father told us about an apprentice medicine cat that went to Nightstar, claiming to be able to walk about the past. She told Nightstar about the Dark Forest cats causing havoc among the future clans and why," Clawmoon replied. "You were the one who went to him, right?"

"Yes, I am," she replied, shocked by how suddenly they knew of her abilities already. *So I can change the present by changing the past?* It seemed her powers had gotten stronger. Before, she could only watch, unseen, unheard. The possibilities were opening up to her. Think of all of the things she could do with such a power!

"We'll hold a celebration for Birdpaw! In thanks for saving Blackfeather's life," meowed Crowstar happily. "Let's go. Blackfeather, I'll send apprentices to change your nest. Our warriors will go out and get the best prey for our medicine cats!" She held her head high. With her tail high, she trotted out, Clawmoon behind her.

Birdpaw purred in amusement. "I never thought I'd have a feast in my honor."

"You deserve it," Blackfeather mewed before beginning to clean his fur.

"I couldn't agree more," Snakepaw purred. He touched his nose to hers. "You are truly an amazing cat."

That evening, Wingclan and a patrol of Snowclan sat around the camp, talking excitedly about Birdpaw saving Blackfeather. Birdpaw felt shy and embarrassed. This was not something she thought would happen from having this power. But she enjoyed it. It was a nice break from the future looming over them.

Snakepaw and Blackfeather sat on either side of her. The three were sharing the biggest rabbit Birdpaw had ever laid eyes on. It was

caught by Crowstar herself and she had been practically shaking with a purr as she presented it to them. Shortly after, she announced what had happened and the cats were excited. The Snowclan patrol had arrived earlier to check on their medicine cat.

Blackfeather stood when Crowstar motioned for him with her tail. The cats looked up from their meals when Crowstar called for their attention. Her eyes were shining and so were Blackfeather's. "I have decided to make another announcement. Blackfeather has decided to take on an apprentice."

Birdpaw noticed a kit bounce out of the corner of her eye and she looked over at it. It was a she-kit she'd been introduced to a bit ago. Her name was Shrewkit. She had a dark brown pelt and hazel eyes. She had recently turned six moons old. From the way she was bouncing around, Birdpaw could tell she would be the apprentice. She was the only kit after all.

Crowstar laid her gaze on Shrewkit. "Shrewkit, step forward."

Shrewkit's mother, Owlfeather, began licking her fur vigorously to get her prepared for her ceremony. The cats purred in amusement as Shrewkit got free of her mother and ran forward excitedly. She shook with eagerness as she stopped in front of her leader.

"Shrewkit, you have been chosen by Starclan to be a medicine cat. From this moment on, you will be known as Shrewpaw and your mentor will be Blackfeather."

Shrewkit trotted up to Blackfeather after exchanging licks on the shoulder with Crowstar. The cats around them cheered her name. Birdpaw did her best to shout it loudest of all, proud of the kind kit. "Shrewpaw!" she shouted to the sky.

Once the shouting died down, Blackfeather led his apprentice over to Snakepaw and Birdpaw. "Join us in eating this rabbit," he mewed proudly. Shrewpaw purred as she crouched by the rabbit.

Birdpaw was tired by the time she sank into her shared nest with Snakepaw. "For once, I don't want to dream," she mewed as she curled up.

Snakepaw curled around her. "Why is that?"

"All I ever dream is about Starclan and random bits of the past." She yawned.

"Well, I hope you don't dream," he meowed, amusement in his voice. He began licking her fur in a comforting manner. His rhythmic licks relaxed her and she closed her eyes. She soon found herself slipping into sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Bluepaw edged closer to the edge of the branch she was crouched on. She peered over the vine wall of Snowclan's camp. She could see her sister and a cat she never thought she would see again. Snakepaw! The handsome tom was walking close to Birdpaw as they went over to the fresh-kill pile.

Their tails were twined. Bluepaw narrowed her eyes. If they were truly medicine cats, they wouldn't be so obvious about their love for each other. They wouldn't even be together! She glanced around the camp. The other cats were off on patrol. She could easily get in past the guard and try and become one of them again.

She missed clan life. It was a lot better than being a rogue. Oaktooth and Featherfoot were harsh when they trained her and often would steal her food. The two were now fat from her meals. She dug her claws into the wood. It always made her mad to think about it. She caught the prey. Why couldn't they just let her have it?

Birdpaw and Snakepaw sat together to eat. When had they gotten so close? She remembered Snakepaw used to be so grumpy that everyone was scared to go near him. But since Birdpaw started living with them, he calmed down and treated everyone nicer. How could Snakepaw even like her? Birdpaw was a liar and she manipulated everyone around her.

Bluepaw climbed down from the tree. She needed to put a stop to her. But it would take time. She couldn't just run in and attack them. She was outnumbered by them and the guard at the entrance. She would have to act like she wanted to rejoin them. But first, an offering.

After a quick bit of hunting, she caught two squirrels. She dragged them by their tails up to the entrance. The guard, Crowfur, stood when he saw her. "Bluekit?" he asked in shock, recognizing her.

"You're back!" He ran to her. "We thought you were never coming back after Featherfoot took you!"

She set the squirrels down. "I managed to get away after they finally left me alone for a while. I want to rejoin Snowclan," she meowed as a cold wind blew, promising snow.

Crowfur purred. "Come in. I'm sure Frostar will be happy to have you back." He led her in after she picked up the squirrels.

Birdpaw and Snakepaw looked up from their meals and their eyes widened at the sight of her. Birdpaw got to her paws. She didn't run to greet her. Bluepaw didn't want her to either. Bluepaw set the squirrels down as a patrol bounded into camp behind her and Crowfur. Pelts were raised and they were growling, tails flicking.

Their eyes landed on her as she turned around. Recognition flashed in their eyes and they calmed down. "Bluekit is back!" They surrounded her, purring and rubbing against her.

She recognized Amberheart, Shimmertail, Longfur, and Snowfeather. The patrol sent to their sister clans had returned. Intrigued by the commotion, Frostar had come out of her den. Seeing her, Frostar bounded over to them. She pushed through the cats and stopped in front of her. "Bluekit, you're back!"

Bluepaw noticed she was less enthusiastic about her return. Why was that? Bluepaw remembered the squirrels. She placed her paw on one. "I want to rejoin Snowclan. I hope you accept my offering."

Frostar looked down at the offering of prey. Fear flashed through her blue eyes but it was gone quickly. "Yes, I accept your offering. Welcome back." Her voice was taut and she abruptly turned away. She headed back to her den, motioning with her tail for Snakepaw and Birdpaw to follow. Snowfeather ignored them. "Bluekit, let's share a meal together."

"It's Bluepaw now," she corrected, finally unable to stand being called Bluekit.

"Oh? Did Featherfoot make you an apprentice? That's great!" So she

knew about that day? It seemed that she didn't know that she had left on her own. This cat would be easy to use to get to the top.

Bluepaw purred. "I'd be glad to."

"Heartpaw! Shroudpaw! Mudpaw!"

The two new apprentices looked around proudly as their name was cheered. Heathertail and Crowfur seemed to shout it the loudest. They were proud of their kits. Bluepaw felt regret when she thought of Leafkit. She should be here with them. But her life had been ended by an unknown cause.

Heartpaw's mentor, Shimmertail, led Heartpaw out of camp after the cats broke apart to return to their duties. Shroudpaw and her mentor, Amberheart, followed close behind. Mudpaw and her mentor, Shardtail, were talking as they stayed behind. Bluepaw had yet to be given a mentor even though she had arrived a few days ago.

Froststar seemed hesitant to give her one when she brought it up that morning. *She doesn't trust me. She doesn't want me to be a warrior.* Bluepaw growled quietly at the thought. She could see Froststar look at her with fear every time they were near each other. Maybe Birdpaw had told her something.

Birdpaw always had something to do with the bad things happening to her. Said cat was talking with Froststar, their heads close. Snakepaw was with them. She watched with narrowed eyes as they came to some sort of decision. What had they been talking about? She knew the answer when Snakepaw glanced at her quickly. *Stop talking behind my back.*

She got up when Birdpaw began padding over to her. They glared at each other when she came to stop a few tail lengths away. "Snowfeather has been chosen for your mentor. It will be announced tonight."

"Finally. I was bored of having nothing to do," Bluepaw snorted. "So, what's been going on with you?"

"That is none of your concern. I am a medicine cat. You are not allowed to know what goes on."

"You're my sister. I would like to know what happened while I was away," she meowed, feigning hurt. She knew Birdpaw saw right through it.

"You should not have come back," Birdpaw growled before walking away.

What was her problem? Was she upset that she was back and was going to expose her? But how would she know? Starclan couldn't tell her that. *Starclan doesn't even exist. If they did, you wouldn't be a medicine cat, Birdpaw.*

Chapter Twelve

Birdpaw couldn't stand her sister. The vision sent to her haunted her every time she looked at Bluepaw. As the days passed, she tried to convince Snowfeather of the prophecy and that she should watch Bluepaw but the deputy wouldn't hear it. Birdpaw kept pushing till she snapped at her in front Froststar and Snakepaw.

"Enough! I don't believe you! How can something like happen? Starclan doesn't exist!" Snowfeather snarled. Birdpaw backed away fearfully as she and the other two cats stared at their deputy in horror.

"How can you say that?" Froststar demanded. "You've seen me lose a life before!"

Snowfeather rolled her eyes. "Honestly. You didn't lose a life. You weren't critically injured or sick. You're just faking it for attention."

Froststar was appalled by her sister's words. She fell silent. Birdpaw growled. "How could you become deputy if you don't believe in your ancestors?"

"My beliefs don't rule how I am as a deputy."

Birdpaw knew she was right but couldn't stand the idea that she didn't believe in Starclan after everything that had happened. "Then how would we know that Windfire died before you even got back?"

"You didn't know until I told you. Pretending to know by saying 'I know' doesn't mean Starclan exists."

"Birdpaw, give up. She won't listen. She's just going to make up

excuses for herself so she doesn't have to believe in her ancestors," Snakepaw mewed quietly.

She looked at him and saw he was gazing at her thoughtfully. *Oh.* Snowfeather would change her mind when it came time for her to be leader. If Frostar died before her, that is. She sighed. "Fine. But, please, be wary of Bluepaw."

Snowfeather snorted. "You're not telling me what to do just because you think you can talk to dead cats." The deputy turned and stormed out of the training clearing they'd brought her to.

Frostar sat down with a sigh. "I can't believe this. She never believed in our ancestors even after all she's seen with us?"

"Some do not believe even if it is plain before their eyes," meowed Snakepaw.

After that spat, it was obvious Snowfeather and Bluepaw were closer. They would only be with each other, never letting anyone else near them. They were pushing everyone away. Birdpaw couldn't stand to see her sister twist Snowfeather around her paw. But there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

One hot day, Birdpaw lay in the drying up stream dividing the territory. Snakepaw was beside her. He let out a groan. "I want the water to come back. Why is it so hot?" He stretched his front legs out and patted the dried stream bed, sending dust swirls up into the air. Birdpaw watched them, intrigued. They reminded her of the billowing smoke in her vision.

"We need to keep an eye out for fire. The time of Frostar's death may be near."

Snakepaw shivered and she felt him move. "I don't want to lose her. She is such a wonderful leader."

"But she only has one life left. Oaktooth took one of her two lives," Birdpaw reminded him gently.

Snakepaw sighed. "I know. But she could still have many days ahead with us."

Birdpaw shared his wish. She didn't want to lose another of her kin. Even if she knew it was almost time to end their reign, it still hurt. "Greenleaf is awful this time," she said, changing the subject as Crowfur and Heathertail joined them down the stream.

Snakepaw snorted. "You're telling me this when you don't know the other greenleafs?"

She hit him with her tail. "I walk often in the past."

"I know," he purred. "Let's go to the lake. The water will be nicer."

She heard him get up and looked up at him. "But that's for Lakeclan."

"I know but we're still allowed to use the lake. Just because all of the clans gave it to them for food purposes doesn't mean we can't use it."

"Okay." She got up.

"Besides, we're medicine cats. We need to be in top shape to take care of our clan."

She purred. "You're right." She followed him out of the stream bed and to the lake. The lake was surrounded on all sides by the clan territories but the entire shore was set for free use by all clans to avoid pointless fighting. Their founding leaders had learned from the stories by their sister clans.

When they reached the lake, clan cats were frolicking in the water. The level had gone down from the lack of rain this greenleaf. Even when they had gotten some snow at the beginning, it wasn't enough to dampen the heat. "You know, it's weird."

"What?" Snakepaw asked as he looked at her, twining his tail with hers.

"We all have no problem with the water unlike our sister clans."

"Well, that's because we're used to needing to accept all forms of water unlike them," he pointed out. "We're from roaming cats. They

did everything to survive."

"True. The sister clans could learn something from us. Their patrol should be arriving soon, right?"

"No. They come in leaf-fall at the same time Nightclan leaves for their clans."

They started down the slope toward the water. "I thought they would leave in greenleaf."

"They were but it's too hot."

"How do you know all of this?"

"From the last Gathering."

"Oh." She had stayed behind to take care of Mousepaw's bee sting on his paw. He had a bad reaction to the bee sting and she couldn't leave him alone. "Well, that's a good idea. Leaving in the cooler weather will be safer."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Race you!" He suddenly bounded away.

"Hey!" She chased after him, quickly passing him. She let out a purr of amusement at his shocked meow. She jumped over a sleeping elder, clearing him in a wide jump. She landed and continued running, enjoying the wind blowing through her fur. She reached the water and jumped in eagerly. The water felt nice after the heat from their walk.

Snakepaw soon joined her and splashed her. "How in Starclan did you get so fast?"

"I don't know. I run a lot when I go out to gather herbs." She ducked away from another splash. Some apprentices joined them and they ended up in a splash fight. The sun was setting when the clans began their journey home. Snakepaw crouched down suddenly after they pushed past some bushes. She stopped and looked down at him.

"Get down," he hissed, his eyes glittering with mischief.

Excited, she joined him. They listened to their clanmates pass them. When their steps faded, Snakepaw stood. "Come on!" He bounded away toward their shared border with Wingclan. Curious, she followed.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she easily caught up to the tom.

"Outside of clan territories. Where you and I can be alone."

Somehow the thought thrilled her. She found herself purring at the idea. They crossed Wingclan land side by side, their paces matched. They passed a hunting patrol. They called out a greeting when the cats meowed in surprise.

"You're scaring off the prey!" called out Clawmoon, amusement in his voice. He was leading the patrol.

"Sorry!" Birdpaw called back.

Snakepaw glanced at her in amusement. They stopped when they were outside of the clan territories. They were at the top of Wingclan's territory, on the path to Starpond. They panted as they sat down to catch their breath.

After they caught their breath, they walked along the path. "I know of a place I used to go to when I first became a medicine cat apprentice," Snakepaw mewed.

"You would sneak out?" She wasn't surprised.

"Of course," he purred. "I couldn't stand Deerfoot's ranting when I would accidentally mess something up."

"Deerfoot? Ranting?"

"Oh, yeah. He gets mad if you mess up his herbs."

"That's really hard to imagine."

"Now it is. But then, he would get after anyone who would even knock over his piles by accident. After you and Bluekit were born

though, he calmed down. I think it was because he loved Icepelt and was too happy and hurt by the fact that she took Featherfoot as a mate, that he calmed down."

Birdpaw stopped. "He loved my mother?"

Snakepaw stopped and turned to face her. "Yeah, he did. He wasn't always a medicine cat. He used to be a warrior. Icepelt loved him back for a while. I know she still did even after Featherfoot became her mate. Those two would always go out for walks when Featherfoot wasn't around."

"Why didn't they become mates?" Deerfoot seemed like a much better match for Icepelt than Featherfoot.

"Because Starclan was calling to him to become a medicine cat. He ignored Snowdash's words on listening to the signs because he wanted to be with Icepelt." Snakepaw looked up at the sky and she followed his gaze.

"After Icepelt injured her paw during a climbing exercise in training her apprentice, Deerfoot accepted his destiny and became Snowdash's apprentice. He didn't want to feel helpless like he did that day. Some time later, Featherfoot announced his love for her and they became mates which then led to you and Bluepaw being born."

A star shot across the sky. "Why did she leave?"

"Well, from what happened before you were born, I'd say she was tired of being accused of secretly seeing Smokeeye."

She looked at him, not knowing the name. "Who is Smokeeye?"

"Smokeeye was the deputy before Froststar. Apparently he is the only cat not related to you to become deputy. Or at least from what I've gathered by what you've told me about your kin."

She dug her claws into the grass. *I want to visit his past tonight.* "Why would Icepelt be in trouble for seeing this cat?"

"I don't know the story because it happened before I was born but I

do know that he was banished from the clan after he killed Featherstar."

Featherstar was Froststar's mother.

"He killed her?" Birdpaw asked in shock.

"Yes. I wish I knew why but I'm guessing it was because he wanted his leadership early."

Birdpaw reflected back on what Nightstar told her. He and the other leaders had been right to be wary of something like that. "I wouldn't be surprised," she meowed.

The two were greeted by Shimmertail at the entrance. Her eyes sparkled with awe. "Birdpaw, Snakepaw, I'm glad you're back. I have news."

The apprentices glanced at each other, knowing what she was about to say.

"I'm expecting kits!" she announced proudly.

"Who is the father?" Snakepaw queried as he examined her belly when she stood.

"Shardtail," she mewed, love filling her amber eyes.

Snakepaw rolled his eyes at Birdpaw, making her purr in amusement. Shimmertail and Shardtail had been more obvious than they realized. They were always stuck to each other like leaves wrapping honey.

Snakepaw stepped away. "Well, you're doing fine. Come to the medicine den next full moon for your next examination."

"Okay."

They left the happy mother-to-be and went into camp. Snakepaw pressed against Birdpaw. "Wouldn't it be great if we could have kits of our own one day?" he whispered in her ear. The words made her pelt burn with shyness. She was confused as to why she loved that

thought.

It wasn't okay for them to be together. Especially when she had to worry about all of the four clans being targeted by the Dark Forest cats. How could Snakepaw think of something like at such a time?

She couldn't pull away from him though. She cherished the idea of having kits of her own with him. "I would like that," she said finally.

Birdpaw puffed as she followed Snakepaw up the trail to Starpond. She was exhausted from taking care of a fretting father-to-be and a mother-to-be who was ignoring her mates requests of resting in the nursery. Snakepaw shared her exhaustion and was walking slowly up the steep slope.

The medicine cats were waiting for them. Stagpool purred at the sight of them. "You two look exhausted."

"I don't know what's worse: this heat or the cats arguing over whether or not our expecting warrior should be in the nursery," Birdpaw mewed as she and Snakepaw reached them.

"Who is expecting?" Starpaw asked cheerfully.

"Shimmertail and Shardtail," Snakepaw answered.

"That's wonderful news!" Lightheart purred. "I wish them luck."

The medicine cats gossiped as they headed to Starpond. The air grew tense as they got closer. They grew silent as they arrived. Clouds covered the sky. "Something's wrong," meowed Coldtail in concern as he watched the clouds.

Stopwater lightly touched the water with a paw. He watched ripples, his eyes squinted to see them in the dark. He was doing a ritual passed down from their first medicine cats: when there are clouds, ripple the water and search for the sign of an entry.

Their Starclan ancestors had worried about something happening to them just like their sister clan and so had set up a way for the medicine cats to have access to them.

"I found the opening to Starclan." He entered the water and stopped in the middle. He reared up and brought his paws down to the water. Water sprayed up and the pond began to glow where he stood. He soon faded away. The other medicine cats quickly entered the water and stood where he had stood.

Birdpaw watched as the living world faded away, being replaced by Starclan. The usual birdsong filled her ears but there was something still nagging at her. "The Dark Forest."

"Do you think they're invading?" Twistedpaw asked fearfully.

"No. I think Starclan is invading them." She darted off, the others quickly following her.

"I don't want to go back to that awful place," Blackfeather meowed.

She agreed with him but they needed to find out what was happening. She somehow knew where she was going. After they had been travelling for some time, they came to a stop at the edge of the Dark Forest. The trees were beginning to change and the growth was starting to die.

"This is it," Birdpaw announced quietly. "Follow me and don't stray off. If you hear your name being called, ignore it unless you know it's one of us." She padded into the forest. The group padded on until they heard fighting.

They all crouched down, fear coursing through them like a river. Birdpaw recognized the voices of Deerfoot and Snowdash when she heard cats yelling. "It sounds like Snowdash and Deerfoot are trying to escape!" Snakepaw growled.

"We won't be able to help them," Stagpool meowed darkly. "We barely know the basics."

True. They were only taught basic fighting moves in case of danger. That would barely raise their chances of winning. But they had numbers. "We're trying anyway," Birdpaw mewed firmly. She moved forward, ignoring the protests of her friends.

She wasn't going to let her friends sacrifice themselves trying to

escape when she knew she could do something to help. *They surely don't even know I'm alive, right?* If she was right, she could use her being alive as a way of shock and surprise to gain the advantage. Combine that with the sudden patrol of medicine cats, they could probably win.

She heard pawsteps running toward them and she heard a familiar voice. "Let us join you." The cats stopped and turned around to see who was coming from behind. Birdpaw was glad to see the forms of Iceheart, Sparrowpaw, Snowstar, and more Starclan cats.

"We saw you entering and knew we couldn't hide behind fear any longer," Iceheart admitted shyly.

Nightstar, Wingstar, and Lakestar padded up to stand beside Snowstar. Nightstar blinked lovingly at Birdpaw. "Hello, Birdpaw. Long time no see."

She let out a brief purr. "There will be time for catching up later. Let's go. We have medicine cats to rescue and Dark Forest cats to teach a lesson!" With a flick of her tail, she turned and led the now large patrol through the mist toward the fighting.

Confident of winning now, she bounded forward when she saw the two medicine cats cowering in front of the toms from before. Darkclaw was padding up to them. Birdpaw growled and picked up the speed. He looked over at her just before she tackled him. She didn't hold back on him as they tumbled and rolled together.

The other toms were soon fighting as well. She and Darkclaw broke apart to gain footing. Darkclaw's eyes filled with fear when he recognized her. "I killed you!"

"You thought you did. I think you should know that shortly after that, I killed Flamepelt," she said smugly, hoping for more fear from him. It worked and he took a step back.

"How could you kill him? You're a medicine cat!"

"You're not immortal!" She bounded forward and pounced him. He dodged and she landed heavily, skidding a bit on the mush ground.

She found her balance but not in time. She was slammed and knocked to the ground by Darkclaw. He had found himself.

"You're not immortal either!" She could see doubt flash in his eyes as he pinned her down.

"Yes, I am!" she snarled, using his doubt against him. She swiped at his face, taking advantage of the closeness. He yowled in pain as he backed away, blinded by her claws. She got to her paws as he turned and fled.

The other toms were struggling free and taking off after him. She hissed. "Leave us alone, cowards!" she called after them. Panting with anger and adrenaline from battle, she turned to Deerfoot and Snowdash. They were watching, their eyes wide. She padded over to them. "Let's get you home."

"Yeah," was all Deerfoot could say. Both toms were covered in wounds and some look worse than when she saw them.

"You're alive?" Snowdash asked incredulously. "I watched Darkclaw give that awful bite!"

"Snowstar saved me after I left the forest." She blinked gratefully at the she-cat. Snowstar purred in response.

"We'll talk more when you've rested and healed," Snakepaw meowed firmly when Snowdash opened his mouth to ask more questions. Snowdash clamped his mouth shut.

They traveled back to Starclan territory. Birdpaw was grateful to be back in the inviting land. "This is so much better than the Dark Forest."

"You can say that again," purred a Nightclan warrior.

Once they were all eating beside a clear river, Starclan allowing them to stay for a while, Birdpaw looked Wingstar. "Why couldn't we get in tonight?"

The Wingclan founder blinked apologetically. "We were testing you to see if you were still open to us, Birdpaw."

Birdpaw tilted her head in confusion. "Of course I'm still open to you."

Lakestar flicked his tail. The Lakeclan founder's gaze was full of uncertainty. "We can't see your future anymore."

"What? What do you mean?" Birdpaw asked in alarm as she looked at the tom. The other medicine cats shared her alarm.

Snowstar sighed. "With you, when you were born, we could see your whole life laid out before you. But since you saved Blackfeather and killed Flamepelt, your future has become clouded and uncertain. We have no way of guiding you until you are facing each clouded moment."

"It's like you changed your entire destiny by that single action," Nightstar meowed. "Just as you changed our future by coming to me that day."

"You are a special cat," Iceheart mewed quietly. "One that could change the destiny of the clans."

Chapter Thirteen

Snowdash scrambled to his paws, his wounds healed and his fur clean. "How could that cover her future? Wouldn't her future be the same?"

Deerfoot stood as well. He, too, was healed and clean. "Is there no way to tell at all?"

"No. We have tried to find ways of seeing her future but we have been unsuccessful," Sparrowpaw meowed as he went to the river to get a drink.

"It's because I changed the past." Birdpaw couldn't help but feel scared. *I have to try harder to look for signs of what is about to happen.*

"We will send a sign when the time calls for it," meowed a mottled tom as he padded up. He sat beside Snowstar.

"Everyone, this is my mate, Mapleface," meowed Snowstar.

Birdpaw dipped her head in greeting. "Good to meet you."

He dipped his head in return. "Likewise."

"Your clans are no doubt wondering where you are," Nightstar mewed as he stood. "You should head home. This discussion can be saved for a later night."

The medicine cats stood. They said their farewells and the starry cats watched Birdpaw lead them away. Her mind buzzed with questions. About the power she had, the Dark Forest cats, the secret held by all of her kin, and her sister's intentions. There was so much going on that it was hard to make sense of it.

Snakepaw caught up and walked beside her. "I never thought your power would cause your future to be uncertain."

She thought for a moment. Sure, it was scary not knowing what lay

ahead with a destiny like hers. But wasn't it better *not* knowing what lay ahead for her? "I think I prefer it that way."

"Huh? Prefer it that way? Aren't you worried something might come to stop your destiny?" he queried, hinting at the end of her life.

"Well, I'll fight whatever comes." She glanced at him. "I have much to do. My life can't end yet."

The sun was almost high in the sky when the Snowclan medicine cats padded through the undergrowth, the vine tunnel in sight. The guard stood. It was Shardtail. His eyes were wide. "Deerfoot and Snowdash are home!" he yowled.

He bounded to them, purring in relief. "You're alive!"

"I am glad to be," Deerfoot said as they entered the tunnel. Birdpaw led them through and into camp. Froststar was bounding toward them from her den. Her eyes shined with relief and happiness.

"Deerfoot! Snowdash! Welcome home! I'm so glad to see you are well and alive!" The cats rubbed cheeks, their purring loud.

"Birdpaw led a patrol of medicine cats and Starclan to save us when Snowdash and I decided to fight back," Deerfoot purred.

Froststar touched her nose to Birdpaw's. "She is certainly worthy of being a Snowclan cat. She has done so much for us all."

Birdpaw felt shy from the praise. She really wasn't that amazing, right?

Birdpaw stood from her finished squirrel. The feast in celebration of Deerfoot and Snowdash returning was going well. She stretched and yawned, exhausted from battle and lack of sleep. *I have more training to do though.* She relished the thought of curling up in her nest and dreaming of days with her mother.

She started making her way to the medicine den. Snakepaw joined her. "Tired?" he meowed as they padded side by side.

"Yeah," she meowed. "After everything, I could sleep for a moon."

"Same. Things have been crazy." They entered the den and went to their shared nest. They curled up together.

She breathed in his familiar scent, comforted by it. She closed her eyes. His purring lulled her to sleep.

"Birdpaw, good morning!" Deerfoot greeted when she stepped out of the den with a yawn the next day.

"Good morning, Deerfoot. Glad to see you're up and about," she said as she stretched. Snakepaw padded over to her, a fat cardinal in his mouth. She purred at the sight. "Look at that. It's huge."

He offered it to her when he reached her. His eyes shined with love and pride. She took it from him happily and moved a bit to the side out of the way of the den entrance. She set it down. "Share it with me?"

Snakepaw purred. "Gladly." He settled down beside her as Deerfoot padded over. His eyes were narrowed.

"You two seem awfully close," he commented as she bit into the warm bird to strip it of feathers. The apprentices glanced at each other. She spit out the feathers she ripped off. "Our friendship has strengthened. We were happy to see each other when he returned."

She felt like she was making the situation worse as she saw that he wasn't believing her.

"Don't let yourselves get closer. You'll end up breaking the code of the medicine cats and lose your position. I know it is tempting but you have to resist." He padded away.

Snakepaw snorted. "I know he is thinking of Icepelt but we will be careful."

Careful? I think it's too late for that. "I'm going for a walk." Her appetite lost, she padded away. She didn't understand why she was going along with Snakepaw. She knew the consequences. She didn't feel the same, right? Was she only doing it out of caring for her best friend?

Her heart leaped at the thought of having kits with him. That conversation they had after he said that had made her so happy. Would she be allowed to have kits? She was sure she could treat them as equally as her clan.

She never thought about the consequences of being a medicine cat when she took the oath that day. It hadn't been important to her. But now, it was all she wanted. And she wanted Snakepaw. If they were both medicine cats, could they at least be mates?

Her paws carried her out of camp and toward Starpond. She needed to know. Was that okay? They would both be able to do their job and still be able to be with each other. They wouldn't be in any battles. Wait.

Her heart stopped at the thought of the Dark Forest battle. They would be in battles. At least her. She never thought twice about fighting to save a life. He would be so worried about her and would think to treat her first even if she was okay.

Moth Flight was right. It is too risky and a distraction. Her heart sank. It was clear now. These thoughts meant she loved Snakepaw. Even though they were both medicine cats, it couldn't be.

She was across the Wingclan border before she heard the voice calling to her. She stopped, coming back to reality. She looked around, pinpointing the voice to behind her. She turned around and saw Snakepaw running toward her.

He came to a stop in front of her. "Birdpaw, please, don't think about it anymore."

"Snakepaw, you know it's impossible," she said quietly.

"No, it isn't! We can be together. We both know the code and we have both been able to set aside our feelings when time calls for it. We can do this!" he meowed, his eyes pleading. "Please, don't say no."

"Snakepaw..." She trailed off, her heart yearning for him. She couldn't deny that she loved him.

"As much as it pains me to say, we don't have to have kits."

Her heart squeezed in sadness. He was desperate to have her as his. "Oh, Snakepaw."

"Please, Birdpaw. I love you."

She felt like she was light as a feather when he spoke the words she had never realized she longed to hear. Maybe they could do this. "I love you, too." She touched her nose to his. "Okay. I'll be your mate."

He purred loudly as he rubbed his muzzle against her. "I'm so glad!"

She purred with him. The path was long and dark but with him by her side, she could do anything.

They were padding back to camp when they heard something crashing through the forest toward them. They began scrambling up trees out of fear. Birdpaw happened to look down and saw Snowfeather running through the undergrowth.

"Snowfeather!" she called, halting the deputy. She could see now her fur was bushed and her eyes wide as the moon.

Snowfeather looked up when Birdpaw called again. "There you are! Come quick! Snowhare won't wake up!"

Birdpaw threw herself off the tree trunk and dashed to camp. She heard Snakepaw and Snowfeather trying to keep up. She reached the vine tunnel and ignored the guard, Amberheart. She shot through and to the elders' den. Deerfoot and Snowdash were already inside when she jumped in.

She halted where she landed. Panting, she padded over to the elder's stiff body. "Is he....?"

"Yes and from a horrible poison," growled Deerfoot. He nodded at the mouse laying in front of Snowhare's head.

She padded over to it and peered at it closely. She recognized the red berry even though half of it was eaten. The infamous death

berry. She sucked in a breath. "Who gave him this mouse?" she demanded, remembering how Oaktooth had tried to kill Froststar the same way.

"We don't know." Snowdash walked out after speaking.

Birdpaw turned to Snowhare. *What an awful way to go. Grassear will be heartbroken.* Said she-cat burst into the den. She wailed when she saw her mate in their shared nest.

"Snowhare!" She ran to his side and nudged his cheek. "Love? Please, wake up! Tell them you're fine," she begged. When he didn't move, she let out a wail of grief.

Birdpaw and Deerfoot turned away. She couldn't bear to hear her anymore. She padded out slowly as Snakepaw and Snowfeather tried to keep the clan calm. All attention went to her. Froststar, having just returned with a hunting patrol, looked at her anxiously.

Keep calm. This is the life of a medicine cat. You must announce death and life. Save and lose a life. It is how all life is. She lifted her head, her heart feeling as if she lost a piece of it. "Snowhare is dead," she announced.

Froststar hung her head as wails of grief filled the camp. Birdpaw went up to her. "Froststar, we must talk in your den," she said quietly. Froststar met her gaze and gave a nod, her eyes wet with grief.

"Such a sad loss. Another of my clan gone. Another friend lost," she mewed, her voice thick with sadness, as she led her to her den. "He was looking forward to seeing Shardtail's kits." They entered her den.

She sat in her nest. Birdpaw knew that what she was about to say would cause a wave of chaos in the clan. "Snowhare was poisoned the same way you were."

Froststar stared at her in horror. "He was murdered? But who would want to murder him? He is such a kind cat!"

"I will find out."

"Please do so that justice may be served." She clawed her nest. "I can't believe this is happening again," she spat. Her eyes blazed with unconcealed fury. "I will banish all who dare stand against my clan!"

Birdpaw dipped her head as she backed out. She had work to do. Snakepaw and Snowdash were waiting for her. "You need to use your power?" Snowdash guessed.

"Yes, but I don't know if I should save Snowhare." She had been pushing the thought away but it wouldn't leave.

"Save him? But he is dead," Snowdash meowed, confused.

"She brought Blackfeather back," Snakepaw purred. "She can basically fully travel back in time and change things for the better."

"Oh. That's amazing, Birdpaw!" Snowdash mewed, gazing at her with awe.

"I can't go saving every cat, can I?"

"Only the ones that don't die from sickness and age, I guess," Snakepaw said with a shrug. "With your ability, we have a higher chance of saving cats."

Birdpaw held her head high. "Then I will save him." They followed her to the elders' den. Deerfoot was about to take his body to the clearing.

"Wait. I want to try something," mewed Birdpaw.

Deerfoot let go of Snowhare's scruff. "But he is already gone."

"Let her do this. She saved Blackfeather. She can save Snowhare."

Grassear looked at her. "Please, save him!"

Birdpaw laid down in a nest and curled up. She closed her eyes.

"What is she doing?" asked Grassear and Deerfoot asked in unison.

"Hush. Let her sleep and I will explain when she slips into sleep," meowed Snakepaw.

She blocked out their voices and focused on emptying her mind. Lucky for her, her emotional battle earlier had tired her out. She was soon asleep.

She opened her eyes when she heard a huff of pain. She lifted her head and saw Snowhare stretching. "I need to get some herbs for this pain," he grumbled.

"Snowhare," she mewed, standing. He looked up, startled.

"What? Birdpaw? When did you come in here?"

"I will explain when I wake up alongside you later."

Pawsteps sounded at the entrance and Mousepaw padded inside. He carried the mouse that would end Snowhare's life. When he set it front of Snowhare, Birdpaw quickly snatched it away. Snowhare and Mousepaw both stared at her.

"What is the meaning of this?" Snowhare demanded, offended.

"Mousepaw, go on. Get rid of the fresh-kill pile. Tell anyone who asks I said you need to."

"Why?" he asked, tilting his head.

"Don't question it. I will explain later." She flicked her tail. "Go on!"

He hurried out of the den. She turned her attention to Snowhare. "This mouse is poisoned with death berries. I intend to find out. Now, when I wake up, you will be alive," she mewed as she pushed the mouse into the nest. She carefully laid on it and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes, the cats were staring intently at Snowhare and her. She lifted her head and shifted a bit, feeling the mouse beneath her. The cats were spooked when she looked at their faces. "What?"

"The mouse disappeared!" stammered Grassear.

Snowhare's paws twitched and curled before he stretched, spreading apart his toes. He opened his eyes and saw his mate and the medicine cats staring at him. "What's going on?" he asked as he got up stiffly.

"Oh, Snowhare! You're alive!" Grassear rubbed her muzzle against his, her mew full of relief.

Snowdash and Deerfoot turned their shocked gaze to Birdpaw. "You actually saved him," breathed Snowdash.

She got up, revealing the mouse. Snakepaw purred. "There's the missing mouse."

Grassear stared at it. "So you went back in time?"

"Yes," Birdpaw mewed as she moved so that Snakepaw could take the mouse. He gripped it by the tail. "Go get rid of that filthy thing thoroughly," she told him crossly. "I have more to do. I'm going to find out who gave Mousepaw that mouse."

Snakepaw blinked in understanding before leaving. Deerfoot sighed. "So, someone set Mousepaw up to kill Snowhare?"

Snowhare gave a look of fear at Birdpaw. "Who would want to kill me?"

"What have you done lately?" Birdpaw meowed, a thought coming to mind. Maybe he heard something he shouldn't have.

He thought for a moment. "Well, I heard Longfur talking to Shortear about going to join Oaktooth. They don't like serving Froststar."

"Deerfoot, keep guard," Birdpaw mewed urgently.

"On it." He padded out and sat down in front of the entrance.

She curled back up in the nest and closed her eyes. She was soon back asleep.

She opened her eyes and was in the forest. Mousepaw ran by her and flicked his tail in greeting, a squirrel in his jaws. She watched

him disappear through the undergrowth. He had yet to get the mouse.

She quickly followed after him. *All I have to do is find out who gave him that mouse.* They entered camp and Mousepaw went over the fresh-kill pile. Longfur was standing by the pile, a mouse at his paws.

"Mousepaw, take this mouse to Snowhare," he meowed gruffly.

Mousepaw happily picked it up and padded away. Birdpaw closed her eyes. *Wake up!*

She opened her eyes, back in the present. She quickly got to her paws and shot past Snowdash. She jumped around Deerfoot and went to Frostar's den. She darted in and halted. "It was Longfur!"

Frostar stood. "Let's gather the clan." She padded past her, her eyes icy. Birdpaw followed her out, her head high. She watched Frostar scramble up the tree and stop on a branch.

"Let all cats old enough to hunt among the snow drifts gather!" she called.

What few cats were in the camp came to sit before the tree. Longfur and Shortear were among them. Frostar rested her angry gaze on Longfur. "Longfur, step forward." Her tailed flicked.

Longfur gave a look of surprise and padded forward. He stopped at the front and looked up at her.

Frostar wasted no time in getting to the point. "You are hereby banished for the murder of Snowhare." Her tone was cold.

Longfur flattened his ears as he glared at her. "I did no such thing!"

Mousepaw stood. "You gave me the mouse to poison him! You tried to frame me!" he growled.

Longfur spun to face him. "I did no such thing!" he snarled at his apprentice.

Birdpaw stood. "You attempted to kill Snowhare by filling a mouse with death berries. Your scent was all over the mouse. You cannot deny the evidence pointing to you."

He turned around to face her. He stared at her, unable to think of an excuse. He held his head high. "Yes, I killed Snowhare. I wanted to join Oaktooth but he overheard me so I couldn't let him rat me out."

Horrified gasps came from the clan and they stepped forward, growling. Shortear sat back. "How could you?" snapped Shardtail. "How could you betray us?"

"Froststar is a horrible leader!" Longfur growled. "Oaktooth and Featherfoot are right. Why should she be leader if all she does is always look for the peaceful way out?"

"That's a good thing!" Shimmertail yowled from her place at the nursery.

Froststar glared down at Longfur as Snowhare stepped out of his den with Grassear and the medicine cats. "Leave, Longfur!" he snarled.

The clan, save for Birdpaw and Deerfoot, stared in shock at him. Longfur was even moreso. "You're alive?" he stammered.

"Thanks to Birdpaw! I wouldn't be here had she not reacted so quickly. Now, get out of here." Snowhare unsheathed his claws.

Longfur snorted.

"My clan will not hesitate to attack," Froststar warned.

Longfur knew there was no way of winning. He turned and darted toward the camp entrance. He was soon gone.

Froststar jumped down and trotted over to Snowhare. "Birdpaw saved you?"

"Yes," Snowhare confirmed. He blinked gratefully at Birdpaw.

Birdpaw felt proud of her work. Froststar turned to her. "You saved him like Blackfeather, I'm guessing."

"Yes, I did. I was able to stop him from eating the mouse." She sat down as Froststar turned to Snowdash.

"She is more than deserving of her full name."

Excitement filled Birdpaw. *My full name!* But it was short lived. Snowdash sat down. "No."

The clan stared at him in bewilderment. "What do you mean 'no?' She is ready, right?" called Crowfur.

"That is not my decision. She was apprenticed to Starclan. Only they can decide of she is ready. I myself agree with you. But we cannot take over Starclan's work." Snowdash blinked apologetically at Birdpaw. "I'm sorry."

Birdpaw knew he was right. "It's all right. I will just have to keep working to make sure I get my name!" She let out a purr. "For now, I am happy as I am."

Chapter Fourteen

Bluepaw's whiskers quivered as she scrunched up her nose from a leaf landing on her nose. She sneezed before looking up at the trees. The sun made the leaves translucently beautiful. Yet she could barely think about it. She was panting from the heat and Snowfeather had given up on training her for the day.

Snowfeather stretched. "Let's go to the lake. We can train in the evening when it is cooler."

"Good idea," Bluepaw mewed as she stood. They headed to the lake, grouping up with Froststar and her border patrol. They must have just finished.

As they got closer, they could hear the shrieks and screeches of cats fighting and in pain. Froststar bounded off, her patrol, deputy, and Bluepaw close behind her. What was going on? Was it the mountain cat?

They burst through the dry undergrowth and stopped in bewilderment at the sight before them. The Snowclan medicine cats were being attacked by something invisible. Their pelts were being torn and blood was spattering the ground. Birdpaw seemed to be the only one who wasn't hurt. She dodged something before swiping the air with unsheathed claws.

Satisfaction glittered in her eyes as she then crouched and pounced the invisible attacker. She landed on something and bit hold of her attacker. A shriek came from whatever she was on.

"What is going on?" Froststar demanded as she led the cats to them.

Birdpaw was churning her hind legs, blood on her paws. She was thrown off and she got up after a brief moment. *She must have been stunned by the impact.* Bluepaw felt sympathy for her sister. She

wasn't a warrior. Fighting must be harder on her than it was on Bluepaw.

Birdpaw looked at Snakepaw who was pinned by something. Her eyes glittered with anger. "Darkclaw, get off of him!"

Darkclaw? She had heard the name mentioned by Birdpaw before. Wasn't he a Dark Forest cat?

She watched Birdpaw tackle the invisible attacker and she tumbled and rolled. Snakepaw panted as he got up, bleeding from a scratch across his face. Deerfoot and Snowdash managed to shake off their attackers and ran toward the patrol.

"Why can't you leave us alone, coward? Why attack the weak?" Birdpaw yowled. Suddenly she vanished.

"Birdpaw!" Froststar yowled in shock.

Bluepaw stared at where her sister had been. She was stunned. "But how? How could she just disappear like that?"

"Birdpaw is in the Dark Forest! We have to help! Snakepaw, go to Nightclan! Snowdash, you go to Wingclan! I'll go to Lakeclan!" yowled Deerfoot.

The patrol watched the cats take off in their ordered directions. What was going on? Bluepaw glanced at Snowfeather. She knew she didn't believe in such things. Would this change her mind? Bluepaw sure was doubting her own opinion. There wasn't a hole where Birdpaw had been. The way she disappeared was nothing like falling into a hole either.

She truly had a connection with Starclan and the Dark Forest.

Why am I worried? She is a manipulative liar. She means nothing to me. Maybe I'm scared of what will happen to us if we stay. She looked away from the spot. She was confused as to why she wanted to join the medicine cats in rescuing her sister. She pushed her worry away. Birdpaw wouldn't worry about her so why should she worry about her?

Bluepaw padded over to Snowfeather. Snowfeather sat down. "What do we do now?" Bluepaw mewed.

Froststar sighed. "Nothing. There's nothing we can do. We have no connection with Starclan. We can't simply travel there and go to her."

So it was up to the medicine cats then? They weren't fighters. Bluepaw snorted. Look at all of the problems her sister had caused.

Bluepaw looked up from her mouse when the medicine cats returned that evening. Birdpaw was limping and a gash was covered in cobwebs on her shoulder. Bluepaw was appalled by the cats running to greet them with relieved mews and worried questions. How could anyone like Birdpaw? It was all a trick other than her connection.

Why couldn't they see what she saw?

The medicine cats escorted Birdpaw to their den and disappeared inside as the cats gathered around the den. Bluepaw went back to eating her mouse. She would stop Birdpaw one day and save her clan from her tricks.

Snowfeather padded over to join her. She had a crow in her mouth. She crouched beside her and started plucking the feathers off. "Have you seen Shortear today?"

"No, I haven't. I thought he was sleeping from the heat."

"No, he hasn't been in camp all day. I think he went to join Oaktooth." Snowfeather's gaze clouded with uncertainty. "Why do they think my sister is a terrible leader? She is an amazing leader, always calm no matter the situation."

Bluepaw didn't share her opinion. Froststar was weak hearted and helped every single cat she could. It made her clan weak and pathetic. Showing compassion to even cats who stood against her made it worse. She had simply banished them. Bluepaw would have eliminated them. If they weren't alive, they couldn't question her leadership anymore.

It was better than chancing a rebellion later.

She enjoyed the idea of being leader. She just had to keep sticking to Snowfeather's side and she would become the next deputy. Then she could eliminate Snowfeather and take her place as leader. But she would have to wait a few days before that could happen. It would look suspicious if she died so soon after her inauguration to leadership.

Bluepaw glanced at Snowfeather, remembering her question. "I don't know," she answered. "They seem to only be after horrible power."

Snowfeather sighed. "I fear for Froststar."

You should. Soon she won't be around. Bluepaw planned to quicken the end of her leadership as soon as she was made a warrior. That itself wasn't faraway with how hard she had been training.

Greenleaf turned to leaf-fall and Nightclan sent out a patrol to spend time with their sister clans. Their sister clans' patrol had arrived just before they left and were with Lakeclan for the first half-moon.

Bluepaw couldn't help but be excited at the thought of finally meeting cats from the other clans. Her clanmates shared her excitement. They were full of energy as they went about their duties, Snowfeather most of all. She couldn't seem to stop talking about a tom from Thunderclan. His name was Leaftail. Apparently he was the best warrior she had ever seen.

It was a few days before the sister clans' patrol would go to Nightclan that Bluepaw spotted Snowfeather slipping out of camp alone. Bluepaw had just stepped out of the dirtplace tunnel. *What are you doing?* Snowfeather never went out at night unless it was for patrol.

Bluepaw trotted to the tunnel and slipped through, flicking her tail in greeting to Shortear. He had reappeared the night Birdpaw returned from suddenly vanishing into the Dark Forest. It turned out that he had fallen asleep at the stream. Shardtail confirmed it.

She followed Snowfeather's scent to the border, occasionally hearing her as she trotted ahead of Bluepaw. Bluepaw stopped in the bushes lining the border with Nightclan. Stagpool was waiting for her. Snowfeather purred as she padded up to the scent line. "How is Leaftail?"

Stagpool purred. "He is fine. He is excited to see you. Normally I wouldn't allow such a forbidden thing but your love is too bittersweet to say no to."

"Thank you, Stagpool. Tell him I love him."

He dipped his head. "I will."

Bluepaw was shocked by this. Snowfeather, her deputy, was breaking the code! She narrowed her eyes. She didn't care about whether their love was sad or not. Snowfeather was giving her another reason to end her leadership when she became Snowstar. Love was pointless in Bluepaw's eye. You were only hurt by it.

A black cat flashed in her mind. *Jasper.* He was a rogue her age that she had fallen for while with Oaktooth and Featherfoot. He had joined their group alongside his friend, Smokeeye.

She pushed the memories away and backed away slowly as the two cats continued chatting like old friends. When she was sure she was far enough away, she turned and tip toed away. She would stay silent for now. It was a good piece of information to use against her if she needed to.

Chapter Fifteen

Birdpaw stretched out luxuriously as she slowly squeezed out from under a bush, enjoying the branches scratching along her spine. Snakepaw shifted in his sleep behind her. They had gone out for a night walk and ended up taking shelter from sudden gusts of wind that chilled them.

The wind had calmed somewhat as the night passed. She stretched some more before going off to hunt for them. She still felt energized from the walk. Well, more of a run. They had raced each other through the territory.

I hope the night herb gathering excuse will still work, she thought as she paused to open her mouth to scent prey. The aroma of mouse caught her attention. She grew excited. She tracked it to a root of a thick pine. She crouched and padded forward slowly. She kept her tail up and stiff. She paused when she saw a nose poke out from under a small pile of leaves.

She judged the distance as a mouse slipped out and began foraging. *Now!* She pounced and landed on it. She bit its neck, finishing it off. Proudly she picked it up in her jaws and trotted back to Snakepaw. The tom was still asleep when she arrived. She set the mouse by the opening before going off to get more prey.

When she returned with another mouse, Snakepaw was stretching in front of the bush. He purred when he saw her. "Good morning, Birdpaw. I see you had good hunting."

She set the mouse down. "Good morning, Snakepaw. Yes, the prey is running well still," she purred. They crouched down together to eat. When they finished, they buried their remains under the bush before heading back to camp.

"We should gather herbs to make it seem like we were out gathering

herbs," Snakepaw mewed. So he remembered their excuse too.

"Yeah, we should. Deerfoot and Snowdash will have our heads if they find out the real reason."

The two apprentices padded into camp at sun-high, their jaws full of herbs. They were greeted as they passed cats leaving for patrol. Birdpaw felt nervous as they reached their den and went inside. Deerfoot and Snowdash were going through the herbs. They looked up from their work when they entered.

"There you two are!" Snowdash scolded. "I was wondering why your nests were cold this morning."

Deerfoot narrowed his eyes. He knew exactly why. "I see you were out gathering herbs. Good. We need fresh supplies." His anger relaxed in gratitude. Their bundle of herbs had gained them relief from being scolded about their relationship.

Birdpaw and Snakepaw set their bundles down and began organizing them. She glanced at the herbs Deerfoot and Snowdash had pulled out and piled up. "Do you want me to dispose of the ones that you don't want?"

Deerfoot pointed at a pile of dried and rotted herbs. "Yes, clear those away. Snowdash and I will go out and see if we can find more fresh herbs."

"Okay." She watched the two toms leave the den before gathering the useless herbs in her jaws. She made a face at the awful taste before carrying them out. She took them out of camp and buried them outside the wall. She sneezed from the scent of the herbs.

She turned and headed back to camp. She paused, smelling smoke. But it was quickly gone. It set her on edge. *The fire must be tonight.* She ran into camp and to Froststar's den. The she-cat smoothing her chest fur. She paused when Birdpaw burst in. Birdpaw found it amusing for a moment when she saw her tongue sticking out.

She quickly stopped herself from purring. "Froststar, we need to get

you to safety. I believe the vision is to happen tonight. I smelled smoke."

"Let's get the whole clan to safety, then. I will not leave them behind." Froststar stood. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she meowed as she led her leader out of her den. The smoke was easily identifiable now throughout the whole camp. Froststar's fur rose. The clan was looking around. Shimmertail's head was poking out of the nursery. Froststar climbed up the tree and called her clan to gather.

The worried clan anxiously surrounded her. Birdpaw took her place beside Snowfeather beneath the branch Froststar stood on.

"Snowclan, we must evacuate our camp. Medicine cats, gather your herbs. Apprentices, help them carry the herbs. We will head to the lake and if the fire spreads toward the lake, we will head further away. Snowfeather, Shardtail, Crowfur, Heathertail. I want you to go warn the other clans. They need to evacuate as well or at least prepare to."

Snowfeather looked up at her and gave a nod. She trotted to the crowd of cats, flicking her tail to gather the three warriors named off. Once they were together, they bounded out of camp, their tails streaming behind them.

Birdpaw led the apprentices into the medicine den. Snakepaw was already bundling herbs together in a large leaf he had brought from a plant they did not know the name of yet. They were still experimenting with it for medicine properties but for now it was great for carrying larger amounts of herbs.

He tied it together with a vine. "Mousepaw, take this."

Said apprentice quickly took the vine into his jaws and carried out the bundle. Birdpaw helped Snakepaw make the next bundle. They had Grasspaw carry it out when it was ready. The third was given to Shroudpaw and the fourth and smaller bundle was given to Heartpaw. Heartpaw padded out of the den, leaving only Mudpaw.

Birdpaw looked around. *Oh! The moss!* "Mudpaw, you'll take the moss. We will need it in for water."

The apprentice, having looked downhearted, cheered up. Her brown eyes shined. "Okay!" Once the moss was tied up in a leaf, she carried it out. Snakepaw let out a sigh. "That's all of it. Let's go find Snowdash and Deerfoot. They need to help us get everyone safely out of camp."

She gave a nod and they ran out of the den. They darted out of camp, worry making her heart pound. "We have to keep an eye on Birdpaw the entire time!" she warned.

"When we get back, we can worry about that." They picked up the pace, following their teachers' scents. Birdpaw called out their names.

Soon they got a reply as they neared the stream. The two medicine cats came running to them. "What's going on?" Snowdash asked worriedly. "I smell smoke."

"Froststar has ordered an evacuation. Tonight is Birdpaw's vision," Snakepaw meowed urgently.

"The apprentices have the herbs ready for transfer. We're heading to the lake. Come on!" He turned around and sprinted away through the dry undergrowth. Birdpaw followed after him, Deerfoot and Snowdash on her tail.

When they got back, Froststar was ordering everyone into a line. Elders first. Shimmertail next. Apprentices in the middle. Warriors in the back.

The medicine cats stayed to the each side of the entrance once in the camp. Snakepaw stood with Snowdash and Birdpaw stood with Deerfoot. They offered words of encouragement as the line headed out of the camp, Froststar in the lead.

Birdpaw spotted Bluepaw carrying feathers behind Mudpaw. She recognized them from Shimmertail's nest. She would need those for a makeshift nest at the lake. They met gazes and Birdpaw blinked

approvingly at her. For now, she was doing the right things. But later, she may turn against them.

Bluepaw returned her gaze with a glare and padded past her.

Birdpaw huffed. Once everyone was out, they followed behind them. The medicine cats moved to pad alongside Bluepaw, acting as if they were guarding the apprentices and the precious herbs they carried. Birdpaw continuously glanced at Bluepaw, making sure she didn't try anything.

She rested her tail reassuringly on Mudpaw's back when she saw the apprentice glance at the medicine cats worriedly. "We'll be fine, Mudpaw."

Mudpaw blinked gratefully but there was still some anxiety mixed with it. When they reached the lake, they could see smoke blowing across the sky. It was all she could smell now. She hated it. Some cats were coughing from the smoke. They stopped so that the medicine cats could tend to the coughing cats.

Birdpaw examined Shimmertail, making sure the stress wasn't causing anything to go wrong with the kits. Satisfied that the pregnant queen was fine, she went on to the elders. Greatfoot was clawing the dry lake bed. "I had hoped to never see another fire before I went," he was meowing to Grassear and Snowhare as she examined Grassear, giving her a Coltsfoot leaf when she coughed.

Snowhare pressed close to his mate. "I'm fine," he meowed to Birdpaw before she could examine him.

"I'm fine as well," Greatfoot mewed as he sat down.

Birdpaw went on to check on Froststar. "How are you?"

The Snowclan leader was clawing the dirt anxiously. "I can't help but be worried about Bluepaw. What if she somehow finds a way to take my life?"

"She won't. We stopped the vision from happening," Birdpaw assured her. "If she does, I can reverse it."

Her words calmed her down. "You're right. Thank you, Birdpaw. I'm glad you are with us." She sat down and looked at the sky. "The fire is coming closer. We will have to rebuild everything." Her mew was full of sadness. Birdpaw sat beside her.

"And we will make our camp better than before. We can think of new ways to run the camp to continue getting clean evacuations like this one."

Frostar looked at her. "That is a good idea. It pays to be well prepared for emergencies like this."

Some time passed and Nightclan joined them. Fallenstar trotted up to Frostar and the medicine cats. Snowfeather was still gone. "As soon as we stepped out, all we could smell was smoke. I'm glad you sent a patrol to warn us, Frostar."

Birdpaw stepped forward and touched noses with him. Fallenstar purred. "How are you, Birdpaw? Nightstar told me everything."

"I'm good now that everyone is safely out of camp."

He touched noses with Frostar. "I never realized Birdpaw was our kin. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Well, I didn't want to spread the news of her power and cause any problems," Frostar explained. "It was Icepelt's decision to not say anything about her kits."

"Still no word from her yet?"

Frostar bowed her head. "No. She still has not come back to us."

Birdpaw felt the hollow feeling come back. She still felt like a piece of her was missing. She looked up at the smoky sky. *I wonder how she is. She hasn't come to me in Starclan so she must be alive.*

"Have you seen her in Starclan?" Fallenstar asked her.

She looked at him with sad eyes. "No, I haven't. She must still be alive if she isn't there."

The two leaders gave a sigh of relief. "Snowfeather and the others will be glad to hear that," Froststar mewed as Birdpaw glanced around to find Bluepaw. Her sister was lounging in the water, panting from the heat.

"I think someone should go check on the camp. See if the flames have reached it yet," Snakepaw said as he came to stand beside Birdpaw. "We'll need to have a heads up if we need to move further ahead of the flames."

Fallenstar nodded. He turned to his clan. "Willowtail, take Foxfire, Clearwater, and Molefur to Snowclan's camp and check out the distance of the flames. If they've reached the camp, return here and report to us immediately."

Willowtail, a black and white she-cat, flicked her tail. "Why should we? It's their camp. Make them do it."

Fallenstar glared at her. "I am appalled that you would say such words. Do as I say." His voice was strict.

She cast her eyes down. "Sorry, Fallenstar. Yes, Fallenstar."

She quickly led the named warriors away. Fallenstar sighed. "I have been having problems with my clan. The younger warriors have been talking back to me, questioning my leadership. They even go against Lightstep."

Lightstep padded up. "I am tired of it. It's the newly made warriors doing it mainly. They talk about Oaktooth and Featherfoot like they're already leaders of their own clan."

"Willowtail seems to realize her mistake," Snakepaw commented. "Maybe she will be easier to deal with."

"Hopefully. I don't like the idea of a rebellion," Fallenstar mewed as he looked up. "Anyway, let's hope they don't find signs of fire yet. This reminds me of the last fire."

"Greatfoot mentioned that as well," Froststar mewed. "There was a fire before?"

"Ah, that's right. It happened before you were born. I forgot you are younger than me." He sat down. It was then that Birdpaw realized just how old he and Lightstep were. The two were both graying and stiff with age.

"It was shortly after I became Fallenstar. I woke to smoke filling our caves. Lightstep came to get me to tell me of the flames taking over the forest. When we left our camp, the other clans were already fleeing for their lives. It was a lightning strike that started the fire. We had no time to prepare." His gaze filled with grief. "So many were lost that day and the following few days."

Froststar touched her nose gently to his cheek as Lightstep let out a shuttering breath. "I lost my kits that awful day," Lightstep mewed. "We got separated by falling trees and they were crushed by a tree before my eyes. It took Fallenstar everything he had to get me to leave them behind so that I wouldn't die from the flames."

Birdpaw felt her heart break, sharing her sorrow. That was such an awful thing to see. Somehow she was viewing the cats as the kits were crushed beneath a burning pine tree. She could feel the heat and smell the smoke stronger than in the present. Flames surrounded them.

When the vision disappeared, Lightstep and Fallenstar were pressed together. "I am sure they watch over you," Fallenstar mewed quietly.

Birdpaw got an idea. "Lightstep, why don't I take you to them in Starclan?"

"What? How?" she asked as she looked at her.

"Birdpaw, don't. That is a secret among medicine cats," muttered Snakepaw. "That entrance is our only secret no other clan cat can know."

"It is for a good cause," she muttered back. "I can't let her go without seeing them. If she becomes leader, she'll go longer without seeing them."

Snakepaw glanced at the deputy. She saw understanding in his gaze when he looked back at her. "Okay. Just don't tell Snowdash and Deerfoot or the other medicine cats."

"Okay." She turned her attention back to the inquisitive leaders and deputy. "Lightstep, when we are safe, I will take you to Starpond."

Her eyes shined with happiness. "Thank you, Birdpaw. You are a kind cat."

Willowtail and her patrol returned. "Fallenstar, the fire hasn't reached their camp yet. We climbed the trees and saw it in the distance. It will be a while before it reaches us."

"Good," Fallenstar meowed as Lakeclan joined them. He looked at Icestar as she sat beside him. "There is time before it reaches us."

"I'm glad to hear that. My clan is anxious to get away from the fire." She looked at Birdpaw. "Hello, Birdpaw," she mewed as Splashfoot joined them.

"Where is Wingclan? They should be here by now. Snowfeather and her patrol left a while ago," he meowed.

Froststar flicked her tail. "They are probably there now."

Birdpaw nudged Snakepaw's shoulder with her head. "Let's go see if we can find them. Deerfoot, Snowdash, watch Bluepaw," she meowed as she padded in the direction of Wingclan.

Snakepaw followed close behind her. He soon caught up to her side and glanced at her shoulder. "It is healing well. Your fur is coming back."

"I am glad. I'm tired of it being cold there." She was glad to get a purr of amusement from him. She was grateful for the lightness of the conversation. It broke her worries for the moment.

They entered Wingclan and picked up the pace until they were bounding through the forest. They reached the bramble camp and were greeted by Gorsetail at the entrance. The tom stood.

"Are Snowfeather and her patrol still here?" Snakepaw asked.

"Snowfeather and her patrol just left. We'll be at the lake soon."

"Good. We'll see you there," Birdpaw mewed. She looked at Snakepaw. "Let's go find them."

"Right."

The two medicine apprentices left Gorsetail to find their clanmates. They found their scents after stopping for a moment. They followed the scents back to the lake. "Look! There they are!" Birdpaw exclaimed when she saw their deputy and her patrol beside the leaders and deputies.

From their postures and bushed fur, she could tell something was wrong. She sprinted down the gentle slope to them.

"We have to find Bluepaw! Why would she go off on her own?" growled Snowfeather as they joined them.

Birdpaw froze. She was missing? She looked at Froststar. The Snowclan leader's eyes were full of fear. Birdpaw dug her claws into the dirt. They had to find her for the sake of Froststar.

She noticed Snakepaw was looking around the cats. "Where are Deerfoot and Snowdash? Maybe they're with her?"

Icestar hissed. "They better be. No cat should be alone right now!"

Lightstep paced around the cats. "We should find their scents."

"I can barely smell anything through this smoke," grunted Splashfoot.

"We have to try!" snapped Froststar, her fear clearly getting to her.

"Easy, Froststar," Fallenstar meowed gently. "I'm sure they are together and out getting herbs and prey."

"Why would there be prey?" the she-cat growled as she flicked her tail toward a herd of fleeing deer. "The fire is scaring everything

off."

"We have to keep calm. Let's send out patrols--" He was cut off by Snakepaw.

"Here they come!"

The cats followed the direction of his gaze. The medicine cats were walking on either side of Bluepaw. She had two squirrels in her jaws and the medicine cats carried three mice each.

"See? They went hunting," Fallenstar purred. "They have the right idea. Hunting will relax us."

Birdpaw wasn't so sure it was a simple hunting patrol. She trotted to meet them. "Welcome back," she greeted, slipping into an act. "I see you did well."

Bluepaw held her head high, the squirrels dangling by their tails from her jaws. She glared at Birdpaw as she passed her. The medicine cats followed with a glance at Birdpaw.

They needed to talk, Deerfoot's eyes said.

She twitched her tail. Bluepaw had been trying to do something. She followed them back to Snakepaw and the others. Deerfoot, Snowdash, and Bluepaw set their prey down. "Bluepaw thought some prey would calm everyone down," Deerfoot explained.

Froststar lashed her tail. "Tell us next time. We were worried." Her voice was tight.

"Sorry, Froststar," Snowdash apologized. "The prey is running from the fire so there is plenty for everyone to catch. We should send out patrols."

"Good idea," Fallenstar meowed in agreement. "Deputies, choose your cats. We'll stay here to keep the clans calm."

Snowfeather led Splashfoot and Lightstep away. They were calling out names as they walked.

"Bluepaw, go give those to some queens," Froststar ordered.

The apprentice picked up her squirrels and carried them away. Once she was out of earshot, Deerfoot spoke. "She was sneaking off."

"Probably to find a way to enact her goal," Froststar growled.

Fallenstar looked at her in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"She plans to kill me," Froststar growled. She clawed the earth. "Starclan sent Birdpaw a vision of Bluepaw killing me."

Icestar's fur bushed again at the idea. "That is awful! Why would she dare to kill you?"

"Why haven't you banished her yet?" Fallenstar demanded as he stood.

"Would you rather her be where I can't keep an eye on her?" Froststar snapped.

Birdpaw took a step forward. "We decided it would be best to watch her and prevent all attempts."

Icestar lashed her tail. "That is a good idea but there is still a higher chance of her being able to get to you. You can't watch her all of the time."

"I know but I feel safer knowing she is where she can be seen easily." Froststar stood. "I haven't slept well in days since she rejoined us."

"You certainly look it," meowed Crowstar as she padded up to them. Three kits huddled close to her.

"Hello, Crowstar," Fallenstar mewed as he touched noses with her.

Birdpaw padded away to help the medicine cats checking over the clans. She needed to distract herself from the dark conversation.

Chapter Sixteen

"Fire! The fire is here!" yowled a voice that cut into Birdpaw's dream. The clans had settled down to sleep after some time. Birdpaw jumped to her paws, startled awake. She jolted when a night patrol burst out of the forest.

Snowfeather led the patrol. She slid to a halt. "Everyone, get up! We have to leave!" she yowled.

Her terrified yowls had already woke most of the cats. The leaders and deputies began doing their best to get things in order right as panic set in. Birdpaw looked at the sky and saw the glow of the flames. Smoke was making its way around the lake.

The vision entered her mind again. Would it happen now?

Snakepaw ran to her side. "We have to get the herbs carried away. We're going to need them."

"Gather apprentices!" she meowed as she darted away to find Bluepaw. She struggled to see through the thick crowd of cats and smoke as she ran. Where was Bluepaw?

She nearly crashed into her leader when the she-cat jumped in front of her. "Birdpaw, where is Bluepaw?" Her eyes were full of panic and Birdpaw couldn't remember ever seeing her like this. Froststar seemed like she was about to lose her mind about this.

"Froststar, calm down. I'll find her. Just focus on getting everyone away from the lake and to safety," she shouted over the cacophony of scared cats.

Froststar growled. "Find her and stop her from traveling anywhere alone." With that, she ran off, calling for her clan to gather around her.

By now, the flames could be seen through the trees. There wasn't much time. Nearly being blown over by a powerful gust of wind, she made her way toward a tree. She climbed up the trunk quickly, bark flying down from her claws.

She climbed onto the lowest branch and scanned the cats. There! Bluepaw was stalking towards Froststar. The Snowclan leader was distracted by trying miserably to calm the panicked clans. Apprentices ordered to carry herbs were running away from the lake and away from the fire. They were most likely also ordered to scout a safe area.

Birdpaw memorized Bluepaw's position and leaped off the branch. She landed heavily and pain shot through her paw as she landed awkwardly. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself forward. She ran in the direction of her leader, dodging running cats. Each step sent pain up her leg.

Just as she reached Froststar, she saw Bluepaw readying herself to pounce Froststar. *No!* She leaped just before her sister and the two she-cats collided. They tumbled when they hit the ground. They lay on the ground when they stopped, stunned by the impact.

Bluepaw recovered first. She was soon attacking Birdpaw viciously. The words out of her mouth were not ones Birdpaw expected to hear.

"How dare you attack Froststar!" she yowled angrily.

Birdpaw fought back, her blows weak from her right front paw. The pain resonated through her body with each hit she made. Bluepaw's claws sent more pain throughout her body. After long moments of being overwhelmed by Bluepaw passed, Bluepaw was pulled away.

Birdpaw, having been rearing up, dropped to her paws and stumbled from the pain. Blood trickled into her eyes from a well placed swipe to her face. She closed them tightly.

"Birdpaw, Bluepaw, what is the meaning of this?" snapped a voice. It was Snowfeather.

"Birdpaw tried to attack Frostar!" Bluepaw meowed urgently. "I stopped her!"

"Birdpaw, why? How could you attack your leader?" Snowfeather asked with a shocked mew.

Birdpaw couldn't believe this! Why was she siding with Bluepaw? "I didn't try to attack Frostar! Bluepaw did!"

"I saw you leap for Frostar!" Bluepaw growled. She was determined to have herself made innocent.

"Back away from Birdpaw," growled another voice and Birdpaw recognized Frostar. "Bluepaw, you are the one who tried to attack me!"

"She would never do such a thing! Bluepaw is innocent in all of this. How could you judge her like that?" Snowfeather growled. "Your medicine cat apprentice here however has been wrongly accusing her of things these past few moons! I'm with Bluepaw a lot of the time! She has never done these things she says."

"She does them when you're not around to witness the actions!" snarled Frostar.

"Never!" snapped Bluepaw. "I would never do such terrible things."

Frostar began coughing from the smoke. "Forget this. We'll deal with this later. Come on!" Birdpaw heard her pad to her side and felt her tail on her back. "I'll guide you out of here," she mewed gently in her ear.

Birdpaw swallowed, her throat dry and raw from the smoke. She was scared now. Not of the fire but of her future in the clan. She could feel eyes burning into her torn pelt as she limped alongside Frostar.

The encroaching fire forced the two cats to move faster. They fled with the other clans to the other side of the mountains. Each day

they thought they could beat the fire and be free of it. Each time they discovered they had to move further.

They finally reached the end of the mountains after four days and were faced with rolling hills covered in brown grass. Smoke from the fire turned the sky a smoky blue. Dark clouds hovered in the distance. They promised much needed rain. Trees lined the ground beneath them.

Birdpaw limped between Froststar and Snakepaw. She wanted to rest but they had to keep moving. It wasn't safe to chance a moment of rest. The herbs she had taken that morning were wearing off. Her paw had been sprained and it took all she had in her to keep moving.

They were on the top of the first hill when Fallenstar looked back at the mountains sadly. "Our home will be gone for a long time. This is worse than the fire from the beginning of my leadership."

Leaftail, one of the visitors from the sister clans, stopped beside him. Snowfeather was with him. "Time will bring it back."

"Yes," the Nightclan leader agreed solemnly. Birdpaw shared his ache for their home. All of their lives were in flames.

They stopped when they reached the trees early the next morning. The fire had yet to pass over the mountain they had left behind. The clans worked together to make temporary nests. Some cats grumbled about working with other clans but didn't make an argument out of it.

Froststar sat down on her haunches heavily. Her breathing was ragged again even when Snowdash and Deerfoot had given her herbs to ease her breathing. Birdpaw leaned against her after sitting down as well.

Snakepaw hurried off to get more herbs. Froststar crouched. Her breathing turned into violent coughing. Birdpaw hissed when the she-cat coughed up black phlegm. Blackcough. "Snowdash!" she yowled.

The medicine cat came running. He had herbs in his mouth. His eyes clouded with worry at the sight of the phlegm. He dropped the herbs and sorted through them. Birdpaw didn't see what he gave her as she began coughing herself. She still had some smoke in her lungs but it didn't seem to be as bad.

"Here. Eat some coltsfoot, Birdpaw," Snowdash mewed urgently. He held a leaf out with his paw, the herb dangling from a claw. She took it in her jaws when the fit was over. She chewed it unwillingly.

"Let's get some much needed rest," Froststar rasped when her fit was over.

"I'll give you each a poppy seed when there are nests ready for you," Snowdash mewed quietly. With a worried glance at Birdpaw, he padded away to check on other cats.

When Birdpaw and Froststar were curled up in nests beside each other, Snowdash gave them each a poppy seed to help them sleep. Froststar was still having trouble breathing. Birdpaw glanced at her. *She suffered because of my injury.* They had been often trailing behind the clans because of her sprained paw. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling guilty. *I had no choice but to jump out of the tree, though. It was for her sake. Please, Starclan, help her get better.*

The poppy seed soon pulled her into a dream. She was standing in Starclan when she opened her eyes. Froststar was standing before her, looking around, sadness in her eyes. She looked at Birdpaw. "I guess it was meant to happen." The stars shone brightly in her pelt.

"What was meant to happen?" Birdpaw asked, not wanting to think about what had crossed her mind.

"My death. The smoke was too much for me." Froststar sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws. "Please, watch over the clan, Birdpaw. If need be, become the leader of it. You are best suited for the position. Snowfeather is too lost from Bluepaw."

Birdpaw wanted to cover her ears and block out the words. "No, you're not dead! I won't have to become leader! You can take care

of them still!"

Froststar stood and licked the top of her head. "My precious Birdpaw, please, don't be sad. You saved me from Bluepaw. That makes me happy. Now, you have more to do, special one. I will watch over you."

Birdpaw wanted to wail like a kit. Her heart was breaking more with each word that left her kin's mouth. "Froststar, don't leave us!"

"I must, young one. It is my time."

"I can bring you back! I can stop myself from jumping from the tree!" Birdpaw was desperate to see her alive.

"No, you know it isn't possible. The smoke would just kill me again," Froststar mewed sadly.

Birdpaw dug her claws into the grass they stood on. "I don't want you to leave." Her mew was thick with grief.

Froststar rubbed her head against hers. "I will always be with you. In your heart, in your memories, and in your dreams. I will visit you when you next fall asleep. Farewell, Birdpaw." She stepped back, the world around them beginning to fade.

"Goodbye, Froststar."

When Birdpaw opened her eyes, the dream was fresh in her mind. She lifted her head and looked over at Froststar. Just as the Froststar in her dream had said, she was dead. Birdpaw couldn't hold back the wail this time. It drew the attention of the other cats.

She got up and moved to her former leader's nest. She stuck her muzzle in her cold fur. *I will miss you, Froststar.*

It wasn't until Froststar was carried away by the elders of Snowclan to be buried that Birdpaw realized Snowfeather had no way of going to meet Starclan for her inauguration. Without belief in Starclan, her dreams were closed to their ancestors.

She wasn't the only one to realize this. Snakepaw and the other medicine cats joined her. Thunder rolled overhead as Snowdash spoke. "How will we get her to Starclan for the ceremony?"

"We can't take her in her dreams," Deerfoot meowed.

Stagpool sighed. "We will have to search for a temporary sacred place for the ceremony. We're running out of time."

"It is about to storm. Do you we have a choice but to stay?" Twistedpaw mewed, seeing the fault in his idea.

Lightheart looked up at the dark clouds over them. "Twistedpaw is right. We'd be better off waiting until after the storm. Starclan will understand."

Rockface looked at Birdpaw. "Can't you take her? Do your powers allow you to do that?"

Birdpaw wished she could. "No, they don't." If she could, would she even be able to take Snowfeather when she didn't believe in Starclan? "We will have to look for a place when the storm passes."

After agreeing it was the only thing to do, they separated. Snakepaw stayed with Birdpaw. "How's your paw?"

"It still hurts. It will be a while before it heals what with all of the walking." The wind began blowing harder and she crouched down, feeling a bit cold from it. He crouched beside her and pressed against her.

"Hopefully this storm will put out the fire," he murmured.

It was two days before the storms passed over them. The medicine cats set out with a patrol of warriors to find a place for the ceremony to be performed. Birdpaw stayed behind due to her sprained paw.

She kept glancing at Snowfeather and Bluepaw, feeling their gazes. Each time, they were speaking quietly to each other, their heads close. Nothing good could come of that, she was sure. If anything, Snowfeather planned to make Bluepaw a warrior and then a

deputy. It was the tradition after all.

She could see the path of her future now. As soon as Snowfeather became Snowstar, she would banish Birdpaw on the false accusation of trying to murder Froststar. And it would go through being as Bluepaw would agree and no one could deny their leader's word.

Would the other clans let her in? Or would she be forced to go off on her own? The thoughts plagued her mind and passed the time. She felt a prod on her side and she blinked, coming back to reality. She looked over at who poked her. It was Snakepaw, his eyes concerned.

"Are you okay? What has you so frightened?" he asked.

She sighed. "Nothing. What is the news?"

His eyes told her that he would ask again later. "We found a cave full of rocks that glitter in the sun. It's got a huge opening at the top. There is an exit across from the opening we entered through so the cave isn't that big. We were able to cross over to Starclan from there. We're doing the ceremony tonight."

"Okay." She stood. "How far?" she asked, holding up her paw.

"Not far. We'll leave in the evening. We'll be able to make it in time. Are you hungry?"

Now that he mentioned it, her stomach felt as if she hadn't eaten in days. She purred. "Yes." Maybe food would calm her nerves.

The Snowclan medicine cats led Snowfeather to the cave that evening. They reached the discovered cave in time. The moon was almost to the highest point. Birdpaw was awed by the stone walls glittering in the moonlight as she limped in. She had insisted on coming despite Snakepaw's protests.

She may not have long with the clan but she still wanted to see Snowfeather become Snowstar. A tiny flame of hope burned. Maybe she had over thought the gazes from Snowfeather and Bluepaw.

Snowdash pointed with his tail at the wall. "Touch your nose to it when it is time."

Snowfeather padded up to the wall, her eyes wide in awe. There was doubt in her eyes as well. She still didn't believe there would be cats giving her nine lives. Birdpaw had also come to see that reaction as her disbelief was turned into belief.

It wasn't long before Deerfoot meowed that it was time. The five touched their noses to the cold wall. Birdpaw closed her eyes as Snowdash explained what to do to Snowfeather. Their voices faded and she opened her eyes. She was standing in the camp of Snowclan. All of Starclan seemed to be surrounding her. Snakepaw and Deerfoot appeared on either side of her.

Shortly after, Snowdash joined them. Surprisingly, so did Snowfeather. Birdpaw had the satisfaction of seeing her stare at the starry cats with her jaws open.

"Hello, Snowfeather," purred a familar voice. Birdpaw's gaze was dragged away from Snowfeather and over to the white she-cat padding toward her. It was Froststar. Birdpaw felt her heart leap with joy and yet also crack with sadness.

"Froststar," breathed Snowfeather. "This is really happening."

"Of course it is. I am glad you finally began to believe. I give you a life of open mindedness. Use this life to listen to all cats and to not judge them right away based on one opinion." She touched her nose to Snowfeather's head and Birdpaw was surprised to see her flinch and tense with pain.

She had no idea becoming a leader was painful!

Froststar's gaze was worried when she stepped away. She padded back to the crowd of cats. A tom moved forward. Birdpaw recognized Nightstar. This was an honorary life. He stopped in front of Snowfeather.

"I am Nightstar, founder of Nightclan." His introduction lit awe back in Snowfeather's eyes. "I give you the life of love. Use this life to

love all of your clan as if they were your kits and to give help to those who need it." He touched his nose to her head and the she-cat flinched again. She seemed to writhe in an inner battle against agony. She stayed silent, though, and Birdpaw almost believed she imagined her being in pain.

Nightstar moved away and a small she-cat took his place. She had a black and white spotted pelt and green eyes. "My name is Snowash. I was a medicine cat of Snowclan. I give you the life of forgiveness. Use this life to forgive your enemies and false wrongs." Snowfeather had to bend her head for Snowash to touch her head with her nose.

When the pain seemed to pass, Snowash pulled away. A tom padded forward. Birdpaw recognized him as Ashfire from one of her visits to the pasts when she was a kit. Happiness lit Snowfeather's gaze. "Ashfire!"

That's right. They're brother and sister. The two rubbed muzzles. Their purring was loud.

"I give you the life of fearlessness," he purred. "Do not be afraid of what you do not understand. Do not be afraid of your enemies or words spoken against you." He touched his muzzle to her head and Birdpaw found she wanted to step forward to help her fight the pain.

Ashfire moved away and Snowstar came to greet the cat that would share her name. She purred with amusement. "I never thought I would have a cat that shares my name among my clan. I am Snowstar, founder of Snowclan," she meowed.

Snowfeather and the other cats joined her amusement. This truly was an odd moment.

"I give you the life of patience. Use this life to guide your clan through troubled times." She touched her muzzle to the top of her head. Birdpaw didn't envy Snowfeather's place.

Snowstar padded away with a flick of her tail. Wingstar took her place. "I am Wingstar, founder of Wingclan. I give you the life of understanding. Use this life to feel the emotions of cats trying to

explain their situation to you." He rested his muzzle on her head.

Lakestar took Wingstar's place when he finished. "I am Lakestar, founder of Lakeclan. I give you the life of guidance. Use this life to lead your clan along the path of the warrior." His touch gave Snowfeather more pain.

The last three lives came from Iceheart, who gave her the life of wisdom, a tom by the name of Chilledrain, who gave her the life of peace, and Leafkit, who gave the life of trust. Birdpaw felt fear enter her heart. The ceremony was over. Her future awaited her back with the clans.

"May you lead your clan with a strong heart, Snowstar," meowed Leafkit before she turned and ran to Iceheart's side.

Starclan cheered her name. The Snowclan medicine cats, save for Birdpaw, cheered. Snowstar held her head high, joy in her eyes.

Snowstar was excited as they headed back to the clans. There was a bounce in her step. Birdpaw couldn't share her excitement as she limped alongside them. She ignored Snakepaw's concerned question of what was wrong. She didn't want to tell him they were going to be apart.

Just as she predicted, as soon as they arrived, Snowstar called for a meeting. The clans gathered around her, Bluepaw at the front. Snowstar held her head high like at the ceremony's end. "I first want to announce that Starclan has made me Snowstar!"

Her name was chanted excitedly. Bluepaw seemed to shout it the loudest. When the cats quieted down, Snowstar continued. "I want to do something that Froststar was unable to do. Bluepaw, step forward."

At the call of her name, Mousepaw, Grasspaw, Icepaw, and Whitepaw looked at her in anger. They knew exactly what was happening. When Bluepaw, tail and head high, stood in front of Snowstar, the new leader continued.

"Bluepaw, you have shown the clan you can be trusted even after

Featherfoot and Oaktooth took you away. You have worked harder than any cat I've seen and have proved you are ready for your warrior name. I thank you for saving Froststar's life at the lake." The apprentice puffed out her chest at her praise. Confused murmurs came from the crowd.

"Bluepaw, do you swear to uphold the warrior code and to fight for your clan even at the cost of your life?"

Bluepaw's eyes were shining. "I do."

"Then I give you your name before Starclan. You will be called Bluefeather. Welcome to the life of a warrior, young one." She rested her muzzle on the top of her head as the clans cheered her name. Only Snowclan remained silent, shocked and angered by this event.

"There is another thing that must be tended to before the night is over. The naming of a new deputy." Snowstar ignored the mews of congratulations toward Crowfur. He had taken Snowfeather's place in her absence and it was thought that he would be named the next deputy.

"Bluefeather, will you accept the place of deputy?" Her words caused outraged mews from the cats save for the leaders and deputies and Birdpaw. They looked away in shame.

"Yes, I will!" Bluefeather meowed proudly. She was unmoved by the angry meows. The two she-cats repeated the muzzle to head. Bluefeather then moved to stand beside Snowstar. Snowstar's emotions changed from happiness to anger. She glared at Birdpaw.

"Step forward, Birdpaw," she growled.

"Why is she angry with her?" Ratscar meowed to Fallenstar. The Nightclan leader shrugged.

Birdpaw limped over to where Bluefeather had stood. She lifted her head to meet her angry gaze. "What is it, Snowstar?" she meowed, denying her the privilege of being able to speak first. She met her gaze steadily.

Snowstar snorted in contempt. "I banish you on the charge of trying to murder Froststar back at the lake."

"What? You can't banish her!" yowled Snakepaw. "She did no such thing!"

"She is a medicine cat! We need her here!" Fallenstar growled, stepping forward. His tail lashed.

"Birdpaw is innocent!" Clearwater shouted.

Birdpaw couldn't help but be surprised by all of the cats on her side. *I never realized just how much they like me.* It made her happy to hear their protests against her sentence.

"What proof do you have of her trying to kill Froststar?" snarled Crowstar, her kits hiding behind her. "They were the best of friends!"

Snowstar rolled her eyes. "That's what Birdpaw wanted you all to think. Bluefeather saw her getting ready to attack Froststar during the chaos when the fire was reaching the lake. Bluefeather then stopped her just as she pounced and knocked her away, saving Froststar."

Birdpaw glared at her. *You ignored the warning Starclan gave you.* She had just realized that the lives given to her were meant to steer her off the path of hating Birdpaw. But it hadn't worked.

Snowstar still received angry outbursts but some had gone quiet, with disbelieving gazes on the Snowclan leader. Birdpaw stayed put when Snowstar growled at her to leave. "You are wrong," Birdpaw meowed calmly.

"No, I'm not. The sentence stands. Leave, traitor!" Snowstar growled. "You have no choice, remember? My word is law!"

Birdpaw hated that she was right. For now, she would give in. She would be back. Her work wasn't done. "Fine, I will leave. But remember this, Snowstar: beware of the blue jay." She felt invisible pelts brush her and heard the voices of Starclan join her own. "The blue jay has its eyes on the top. Misfortune will befall the clan if the

blue jay is not stopped."

Snowstar and the other cats were watching her with wide eyes as she spoke her clan's prophecy. Snowstar shook her fur and glared at her, fear clear in her eyes. "Stop trying to scare me," she meowed, forcing a growl. But it was apparent she was shaken by the voices. "Leave!"

Birdpaw turned around and limped her through the crowd. The cats she passed murmured their farewells. Snakepaw met her outside of the crowd. "Birdpaw, let me come with you."

"No, stay here. You're needed here. Deerfoot and Snowdash will need your help in protecting the clan," she meowed, her heart aching. She wanted him to come with her.

He touched his nose to hers. "Stay safe, my love," he whispered.

"I will. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." His voice was thick.

She continued on, her determination to return moving her forward despite her pain.

Epilogue

Snakefang curled his tail around his paws after sitting down on a cliff. He had discovered the place while exploring one day after the clans returned home in new-leaf. It was outside of clan territories above Snowclan.

The sun shined through the green leaves of the tree he sat under. It was one of the few trees that escaped the fire. He looked down at the burned land. It would be a long time before it ever returned to how it was.

Birdpaw flashed into his mind. He curled his claws into the dirt. He missed her so much every day. He didn't know if she was alive or not. Starclan would not tell him. The only hint that she was maybe alive was that she didn't come to greet him the night he received his name.

He clung to that thought. He used it to keep him going through the long days. He dreamed of her constantly and woke with the never ending ache in his heart. He wished that he had gone with her that night but she had been right. He had been needed.

Snowstar and Bluefeather were both harsh to anyone who brought up Birdpaw. Bluefeather was starting border fights and accusing the other clans of stealing prey. The clans were in turmoil with Snowstar suddenly inviting rogues to join Snowclan.

Without Birdpaw there to go into the past to stop the actions, everything was falling apart.

He felt his heart break. Some of the clan was beginning to believe Snowstar about Birdpaw going against Froststar. If something wasn't done soon, he was sure all of the clans would be against her.

He sighed. "Birdpaw, where are you?" So much had gone wrong after she left.

A sudden loud flapping of wings hovered over his head and he yowled in fear, crouching down. Feathers fell around him before the mysterious bird flew off. When he was sure the bird was gone, having looked around the treetops and the sky for a long time, he looked at the feathers.

The sun turned them different colors as the wind began to gently blow them around. He stared in awe as they were blown in a twisting formation. They reminded him of Birdpaw's eyes. "She'll be coming back soon," he murmured, knowing it was a sign from Starclan.

"She'll come to save us, right?"